

# Doctoral Project Approval Sheet

This doctoral project entitled

TRAINING GOD-DEPENDENT AND COMMUNITY-CONNECTED DISCIPLES  
WHO ARE A FAITHFUL PRESENCE IN A SECULAR AGE

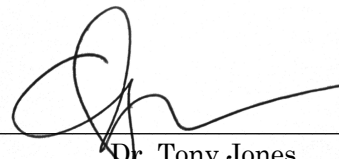
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TRAINING GOD-DEPENDENT AND COMMUNITY-CONNECTED DISCIPLES  
WHO ARE A FAITHFUL PRESENCE IN A SECULAR AGE

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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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## ABSTRACT

### **Training God-Dependent and Community-Connected Disciples Who Are a Faithful Presence in a Secular Age**

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The goal of this project is to equip the adults at Wellspring Church to be God-dependent and community-connected disciples who are a faithful presence of God in a secular context. It is carried out at Wellspring Church in Pacific Grove, California, and it uses Charles Taylor's understanding of secularism as the primary framework for reflection.

The theological reflection section provides biblical insight into secularism in the West. It highlights the biblical narrative's focus on a transcendent God breaking into and dwelling within the immanent frame as well as how the biblical focus on an everlasting kingdom undermines the "YOLO" (You only live once) of the immanent frame. It also underlines the New Testament focus on community as well as the relationship between authentic expression and community in the letters of Paul. This section also notes the church's call to be a faithful presence in the world as well as makes the case that the cross-pressures of secularism provide an opportunity for Christian witness.

The manual design section of this project shifts in a more applied direction. It outlines the theological goals of the training manual, the desired learning outcomes, and the target population of the ministry initiative. It also explains the process of implementation and assessment of the manual at Wellspring Church in Pacific Grove, California.

Content Read: Tony Jones, PhD

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To Jeannie, Josiah, and Claire whom I love.

To Wellspring Church for the privilege of being on staff and serving among you.

To all of my mentors, teachers, and role-models who have invested in me.

Thank you.

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## PART ONE

### MINISTRY CONTEXT

## INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2016, Mike Murphy walked up to the podium of a dying church in Pacific Grove, California and told an analogy. He asked the congregation to imagine that their church was, in fact, God's field. In one corner of the field, God sat ready-to-roll in a bulldozer, and they, the congregation, stood in the adjacent corner with the bulldozer's keys. Imagining this scene, they were then asked, "Are you willing to give God the keys to the bulldozer and let him do what he wants with the field, or do you want to just keep doing your own thing?" It was up to them. And they decided to give God the keys.

I was introduced to this community in the winter of 2016, and by the summer of 2017, my family and I had moved to Pacific Grove to do a church re-plant.<sup>1</sup> We came to Pacific Grove unsure what would happen. Would the church flame out quickly or would God do something? It felt like a risk. Over the course of the last three years, we have seen God show up in powerful ways.

Paul E. Davis, who is in his eighties and who had been at the church for over sixty years, has told me on multiple occasions, his eyes moistening with grateful tears, "This is the most exciting thing I have ever seen God do." And yet, despite the miracles, transformation stories, numerical growth, and financial provision, the challenges ahead are deep and daunting. This is both true for Wellspring Church and the Western church more broadly.

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<sup>1</sup> A "re-plant" is like a church plant, but it is within an existing (usually dying) congregation. It is not a re-build, re-tooling, or restoration. It is a complete re-start: new staff, new vision, and new structures.



Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, has written extensively about these challenges and offers a “detailed existential relief map” in his book *A Secular Age*.<sup>2</sup> In it, he illustrates how our culture’s view of the world, view of the self, and experience of life have shifted. Our view of the world, Taylor explains, is primarily (if not exclusively) focused on “this life” and how we live it until we die and then it is over (independent of God). He calls this the immanent frame.<sup>3</sup>

But this isn’t all. Five hundred years ago, people felt vulnerable to good and bad spirits: God and the Devil. God wasn’t simply a personal belief. God was seen as the ultimate protector and safeguard, and therefore “the prospect of rejecting God” was not the personal choice we presume today (without apparent and obvious consequence) but a profound risk in this “field of forces.”<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, today we live in an “age of authenticity.” We say to ourselves, “I have to discover my own route to wholeness and spiritual depth,” and accordingly, our “focus is on the individual, and on his/her experience.”<sup>5</sup> If one’s belief does not directly hurt anyone, then one is free to think, feel, and do as one wishes. And this not only has profound impacts on our relationship with God but also our connection to (and interconnection with) the community of God’s people, the church.

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<sup>2</sup> This is how Smith describes Taylor’s work. James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 4, Kindle.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 539.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 41. Taylor uses the terms “porous” and “buffered” to explain the shift that has taken place. Modern people see themselves as “buffered.” Previous people saw themselves as vulnerable or “porous.” Ibid., 36-39.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 507.

And these two shifts (how we see the world and how we see ourselves) profoundly impact how we experience life. Because we are just on our own, upon this spinning ball, in the universe, finding truth from within and embracing whatever surfaces, opinions about “fullness” (Taylor’s term for a meaningful life) multiply daily. This creates an experience of life in which all belief is “contested.”<sup>6</sup> No matter what we believe, it is undermined and challenged by another possibility—whether it is consumerism, faith in Jesus, or simply another vision of the good life.<sup>7</sup>

These challenges, expounded upon by Taylor in *A Secular Age*, profoundly affect the people at Wellspring Church. Because our culture presumes a focus on earthly matters (often excluding God’s transcendent presence), when Wellspring members attend church, read their Bibles or fold laundry, they often do not presume the presence of God. Because our culture emphasizes authentic expression—often, separating us from one another—people at Wellspring often do not prioritize deep and meaningful community as essential to the spiritual life. And because of the pressure they feel from the proliferating choices around them (about what to believe is true and good), people at Wellspring often doubt God’s invitation to be his faithful presence in everyday life, in their homes, on their streets and in their workplaces.

God is inviting the people at Wellspring Church to be God-dependent and community-connected disciples who are a faithful presence of God on the Monterey Peninsula. In order for Wellspring to become this kind of people, the adults at Wellspring

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 302.

need ways through these challenges. First, they need to find ways to encounter the living God in a world shaped by the immanent frame. Second, they need to find ways to join together as a community in a world shaped by the “buffered self” in the age of authenticity.<sup>8</sup> Third, they need to find ways to be God’s faithful presence in a “cross-pressured” world.<sup>9</sup>

At its core, this doctoral project is designed to help the adults at Wellspring Church thrive in a secular age. Biblically, Christians cannot thrive without God’s presence, each other’s support, or a calling beyond themselves to love and bless the world. This is the essence of what it means to live in the kingdom of God, and this project is based on this hope—that the adults at Wellspring will not only endure through the challenges of the secular West but flourish with God and with each other, sent into the world as God’s faithful presence.

This project is divided into three primary parts. Part One of this project focuses on the rich history of Pacific Grove, California and Mayflower Church (re-named Wellspring Church). This section also explores Wellspring Church’s purpose, values, and key practices and connects its calling as a church body with the current challenges of living within a secular age.

Moreover, in Part One, the above challenges are explored more deeply. Specifically, Part One unpacks Taylor’s understanding of secularism and the conditions that define it (the immanent frame, the buffered self, the age of authenticity, cross-

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 36-39.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 555.

pressures etc.,) and their direct impact on adult formation at Wellspring—concretely, how the secular age undermines dependence upon God, community connection, and mission.

Part Two of this project has two major sections. The first reviews works on secularism, transcendence, authenticity, and what it looks like to be a faithful presence in a cross-pressured world. It focuses on a total of six works.

The first two works, *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor and *How (Not) To Be Secular* by James K.A. Smith, explore secularism and its impacts in the West. The third, *Recapturing the Wonder* by Mike Cosper, explores Christian practices that enable one to escape the immanent frame. In the fourth, “Church Shopping with Charles Taylor” by Brett McCracken in *Our Secular Age*, edited by Collin Hansen, McCracken examines how the individualism and consumerism of American culture shape Christian expectations of church which, in turn, infects the church’s self-understanding of what it is called to do. And the final two works, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* by Alan Noble and *Faithful Presence* by David Finch, lean into what it looks like to be a faithful presence of God in a secular context.

The second half of Part Two explores how the biblical narrative speaks into our disenchanted secular age. First, it examines the biblical narrative’s focus on a transcendent God breaking into and dwelling within the immanent frame as well as how the biblical focus on an everlasting kingdom undermines the “YOLO” (you only live once) of the immanent frame. Second, it focuses on the nature of biblical community. Specifically, it explores the contours of New Testament church community as well as the relationship between authentic expression and community in the letters of Paul. Lastly, Part Two highlights the church’s call to be a faithful presence in the world as well as

explores the possibility that the cross-pressures of secularism might provide an opportunity for the church witness.

Part Three of this project shifts in a more applied direction. One of the hopes of this project is to produce a manual that can be used at Wellspring Church in order to facilitate adult formation. This section outlines the goals and components of the manual as well as identifies the target population of the ministry initiative. It also explains the implementation and assessment of the manual at Wellspring Church in Pacific Grove, California.

## CHAPTER 1

### AN INTRODUCTION TO PACIFIC GROVE, CALIFORNIA AND WELLSRING CHURCH

Pacific Grove is located on the Monterey Peninsula, between Monterey and Pebble Beach, in Central California.<sup>1</sup> It was founded in 1875 when David Jacks donated one hundred acres of land to the Methodist Episcopal Church to establish a “Christian seaside resort” with strict moral standards.<sup>2</sup> On Sundays, in honor of the Sabbath, swimming was not allowed, and stores were closed. Prayer was central. God was the focus in the small tents that dotted the coastline. It was this way for ten years, but, in 1880, when the Del Monte hotel was built and tourists flocked to Pacific Grove, the retreat began to slowly erode as homes were purchased and two-story Victorians were erected (see figure 1.2.). Quickly, “real estate began to replace religion.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this history is adapted from Tony Traback, “*Raising the Dead: A Look at Re-Planting Dying Churches*,” (TM 753, An Awakened Church for the Future, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA., September 1, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Windows could not be fully covered (to avoid “indecent” within). Cards, dice, billiards, dancing and liquor were banned at that time, and alcohol sale was still forbidden until 1969. Monterey Historical Society, “*Pacific Grove*,” Accessed August 24, 2018. <http://mchsmuseum.com/pacificgrove.html>

<sup>3</sup> Monterey Historical Society, “*Pacific Grove*,” Accessed August 24, 2018. <http://mchsmuseum.com/pacificgrove.html>

In the midst of these shifts, on November 29, 1891, Mayflower Congregational Church was founded.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-four members attended Mayflower's first public service on June 11, 1893.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, on March 14, 1910, the original building was destroyed in a fire. The church was rebuilt by November 13, 1910 (See figures 1.1 and 1.2.)<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1.1. Original Church



Figure 1.2. Rebuilt Church in 1910



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<sup>4</sup> Mayflower was re-named Wellspring Church in January of 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Wellspring Church, "*History*," Accessed August 24, 2018.  
<https://www.wellspringchurchpg.org/new-page/>

<sup>6</sup> These pictures are photographs from the Mayflower Church library.

Over the next the few decades, the congregation grew and by the mid 1940s, it was nearly 350 members. Around this time, Mayflower decided to leave the Organization of Congregational Churches and become non-denominational. With some ups and downs, the church entered the 1970s growing rapidly—so much so that the congregation built a second facility to accommodate the growing number of young families.

This would be Mayflower's numerical height. Over the next several decades, the church declined. And in 1989, the church body, with only a few dozen members, decided to become Presbyterian. While this led to another season of growth in the 1990's, by the early twenty-first century, the church again began to decline. In 2014, it joined the Evangelical Covenant of Presbyterians (ECO), but its decline continued until the summer of 2017.<sup>7</sup> The elders were concerned that if they did not radically shift the church's direction, they would be forced to close the church's doors.

It was during this moment in the church's story that they first considered a church re-plant. The concept and process were introduced through Carmel Presbyterian Church (another local ECO church) in 2016 and by the summer of 2017, the re-plant began. I officially started July 15, 2017. When we first arrived, there were as few as 65 people on a Sunday morning with an average age of 70 years old. There was one family under forty and very few children. We focused on building relational trust, relieving tired volunteers, ending outdated programs/committees, re-shaping Sunday morning, updating building décor and, above all, envisioning a different way of being church.

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<sup>7</sup> Wellspring Church, "*History*," Accessed August 24, 2018.  
<https://www.wellspringchurchpg.org/new-page/>



While these changes were all significant, the largest change was made in November 2017, when we officially changed the name of the church from Mayflower Presbyterian Church to Wellspring Church. This decision was made for many reasons, but the main reason had to do with the name Mayflower itself. When the church was originally named Mayflower Congregational Church in the summer of 1891, the name itself acted like a beacon to people traveling from the Northeast to Pacific Grove, California, saying, “Attend church here! We are from the Northeast too!” But, 126 years later, this message was no longer clear. Mayflower was more connected to pilgrims than to Jesus, and so, as a body, we changed the name to Wellspring Church in January of 2018.

### **Disciple Formation at Wellspring Church**

When I arrived in the summer of 2017, I wanted to align Wellspring’s purpose and values. With the elders, we decided that our purpose would be “to follow Jesus, in community, and impact the world.” Said differently, we wanted to cultivate God-dependent disciples who seek Jesus in community and bless the world as His faithful presence. As one can see, this vision directly opposes key elements of the secular age. God-dependence runs contrary to the immanent frame. Christian community contrasts with expressive individualism in the age of authenticity. And embodying God’s faithful presence means overcoming the doubts and cross-pressures of the secular age.

Our hope, though, was not simply to have a purpose but also values that flow naturally from it.<sup>8</sup> We decided on four specific values—each connected to one of the

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<sup>8</sup> Wellspring values spirit-attentiveness, Scripture, community, and welcome.

major threads of our purpose. Following Jesus, for instance, requires one to adopt a posture of dependence and letting go. Thus, we emphasized the values of *dependence upon the Spirit* and *submission to God's word*. We did not want following Jesus to simply be about ethics, but the transcendent God breaking into everyday life and guiding us—through the Spirit and the Scriptures.

We also wanted to create a culture that highlighted the need for community while fostering dependence upon God. Accordingly, our second value is all about community. Jesus did not meet with the disciples one-on-one in a coffee shop; he formed a community. Because of this, we value the centrality of *Christian community* in the formation process—that Jesus-shaped lives are formed together, not alone. While the secular culture emphasizes “you do you” and self-reliance, we strive to embody authenticity within community—that ultimately, the human person flourishes not alone but together.

Lastly, while we believe that it is essential to be with and learn from Jesus in community, we also believe that practicing the way of Jesus should impact the world. Our goal is to embody the welcome of God. We value being the church, as the *faithful presence* of God, wherever we go. And this assumes entering into the cross-pressured dialogue of modern life in the West—wading into the murkiness of the manifold theories of the good life and extending a vision of connection to God through Jesus. This, clearly, is challenging in any time but especially in a secular Western context.

Structurally, this purpose and these values are reinforced through our Sunday gatherings, Well Communities, classes and other events. But we also assume that values are best carried by practices (no words), and therefore, created a discipleship acronym to ground our spiritual rhythms.<sup>9</sup> The acronym is called ABLE, and it is a tool to encourage clear and measurable on-the-ground practice. First, we ask everyone in their church to make time, each week, to *attend* to God's presence. This is one of the key ways that we try to cultivate dependence upon God within the immanent frame of secularism. We ask everyone who participates in the life of the church to attend to God's presence, listen for the speaking voice of the Spirit and attune their hearts to His invitation.<sup>10</sup>

Second, we ask everyone in our church to *bless* one person in the church (ideally in his/her Well Community) as well as friends, co-worker or a neighbor outside the church.<sup>11</sup> Blessing, when done in this way, both reinforces our community value and extends our body into the larger community as God's faithful presence. Blessing others within the church encourages mutual support and care, and blessing neighbors extends the witness of the church outside church walls into real world relationships.

Third, we ask everyone to *learn* from the Scriptures each week, especially the life of Jesus—to crack open the Bible and let the story of God's people guide them.<sup>12</sup> While this could easily become a means to information accumulation, that is not the goal of this

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<sup>9</sup> It should also be mentioned that the Sunday gathering and Well communities reinforce ABLE in various ways as well. Wellspring believes that community is essential to living out ABLE.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Frost, *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2015), 57, Kindle.

<sup>11</sup> Frost, *Surprise the World*, 29. Frost adds that blessing “has the effect of strengthening the Christian community while launching its members more deeply into the lives of outsiders” (33).

<sup>12</sup> Frost, *Surprise the World*, 71.

practice at Wellspring. The hope is that people find themselves in the stories and “in the stories” discover that God speaks to them. The hope is to get people into the larger narrative of the Bible to see how God has worked so that they might encounter God working in similar ways (underlying the possibility of transcendence and undermining, again, the immanent frame).

Fourth, we invite everyone to *eat* with at least two people in their current context each week—with a person in the church (ideally in his/her Well Community), and with an agnostic friend or co-worker.<sup>13</sup> Like *bless*, *eat* is focused on community cultivation and being the faithful presence of God outside church walls. We believe that friendships are often best formed over food and that God shows up powerfully through hospitality.

At Wellspring we hope to cultivate dependence upon God and deep communal connections and be a faithful presence of God in the world, and its values and practices are built around this vision. This goal, however, as it hits the ground in everyday life, is met with many and various challenges—because these goals run counter to the tide of secularism in the West.

### **Specific Challenges for Discipleship Formation**

For Wellspring to embody this purpose and these values, we must find creative and contextual ways to meet the challenge of secularism. This, of course, requires us to more concretely unpack the depth and nuance of the challenges ahead. To do this, this chapter explores four major concepts (briefly addressed in the introduction) that Charles

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 41.

Taylor explores in *A Secular Age*. While these ideas may seem abstract at first, their implications are profoundly practical.

First, this chapter explores Taylor's understanding of the word *secular* and how that informs what it means to live within a secular age. Second, adopting Taylor's understanding of the secular age, the next section unpacks some of secularism's background assumptions, starting with the idea of the immanent frame and again how that affects Christian dependence upon God. Third, this chapter considers what it looks like to live, in Taylor's word, as a buffered self in an age of authenticity and how this undermines Christian community. Lastly, this chapter argues that both the challenge and the opportunity of living as a faithful presence in the secular west, as visions of the good life proliferate, and all belief becomes more fragile.

### **Living within a Secular Age**

To understand what Charles Taylor means by *secular* and *secular age*, it is important to identify how the word *secular* is used within American culture. First, many people use the word secular to refer to the difference between a computer programmer and a pastor, a cabinet maker and a priest.<sup>14</sup> One vocation is "religious" and the other is not. Second, one might also understand secular to be the difference between public space and private space. For instance, public schools are *public space* and therefore often

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 1-2.

considered *secular space*.<sup>15</sup> But, in *A Secular Age*, Taylor has neither of these distinctions in mind.

For Taylor, the term secular captures the “move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”<sup>16</sup> Taylor asks, “Why is it virtually impossible to not believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”<sup>17</sup>

It is important to understand that secularism, for Taylor, is not primarily about what people believe but more generally the “conditions of belief.”<sup>18</sup> James K.A. Smith, in *How (Not) to Be Secular*, helps explain this further when he writes, “These questions are not concerned with what people believe as much as with what is believable. The difference between our modern, ‘secular’ age and past ages is not necessarily the catalogue of available beliefs but rather the default assumptions about what is believable. It is this way of framing the question that leads to Taylor’s unique definition of ‘the secular.’”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3. Taylor is quick to point out that society often frames secularism as a “subtraction story” when in fact it is “constructed.” See Charles Taylor, “Afterword,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* ed. Michael Werner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 2010), 302.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 3. Taylor also calls them “background.” See Charles Taylor, “Afterword,” 309. James K.A. Smith also calls these conditions the “default assumptions about what is believable.” See James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 19-20, Kindle.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

This definition has profound implications for adult spiritual formation at Wellspring Church in Pacific Grove. According to Taylor, all discipleship takes place within the cradle of secularism—not independent of it. You cannot become a priest or go to your “private” (not public) space and avoid the secular. Taylor’s point is that we live in a secular age that we cannot opt out of. This is true for Wellspring and every church in the secular West. And the nuances of these implications become clearer as we explore the background assumptions of secularism (or, in Taylor’s words “conditions of belief”).

### **Living in the Immanent Frame**

To understand the secular West, according to Taylor, one must appreciate what he calls the *immanent frame*.<sup>20</sup> He explains it this way: “For the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true.”<sup>21</sup> Just for the sake of clarity, notice the two key phrases in this short passage: “first time” and “no previous society.” These are important. No one has thought this way before.<sup>22</sup> And yet,

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor, “Afterword,” 306.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> While Taylor appears neutral in his narrative, Ruth Abby insightfully unearths Taylor’s bias towards believing that humans have an “intrinsic orientation toward transcendence.” See Ruth Abby, “Theorizing Secularity 3: Authenticity, Ontology, Fragilization,” in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Word of Charles Taylor*, ed. Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, 98-124 (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2014), 116-117. But, with that said, Taylor’s bias is understandable given the context of *A Secular Age*. Taylor’s goal is to “decisively” reframe “the issue of religiosity in the modern world.” See Jennifer H. Herdt, “The Authentic Individual in the Network of Agape,” in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Word of Charles Taylor*, ed. Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, 191-216 (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2014), 197.

living in Pacific Grove (and the secular West more generally), this is almost certainly the default assumption of the majority. People are “happy living for goals which are purely immanent” and taking “no account of the transcendent.”<sup>23</sup> Often, even within churches the “transcendent dimension” of faith becomes “less central” and even simply becomes “the achievement of our own good.”<sup>24</sup> James K.A. Smith writes, “So even our theism becomes humanized, immanentized, and the telos of God’s providential concern is circumscribed within immanence.”<sup>25</sup> This fundamentally is an aspect of our culture’s disenchantment—for “one cannot experience one’s surroundings this way in an enchanted world.”<sup>26</sup>

Smith offers a helpful analogy for the immanent frame. He writes, “Like the roof on Toronto’s SkyDome, the heavens are beginning to close. But we barely notice, because our new focus on this plane had already moved the transcendent to our peripheral vision at best. We’re so taken with the play on this field, we don’t lament the loss of the stars overhead.”<sup>27</sup> This analogy captures the current cultural context. We are so

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<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 143.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 222.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 49-50.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 143. White explains further: “Even among those times and places that might be called pagan, true secularity in this sense was unknown. Whether it was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or the gods of Greece and Rome, there were gods—something outside of themselves that people looked to. It would have been alien to anyone’s thinking to begin and end with themselves alone.” See James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 21, Kindle.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 51.



captivated by the things of earth that we have lost touch with the possibility of God encountering us in everyday life.<sup>28</sup>

As one might imagine, this has profound discipleship implications at Wellspring. In this environment it is easy without even realizing for people not to presume and expect the presence of God in everyday life. When a community lives in a “SkyDome” world (defined by mantras like YOLO), they are shaped into a people who don't expect God to actually show up at their doorstep, ride with them on the way to work, or sit with them on the couch as they endlessly search Netflix. Life with God quickly becomes about Bible memorization and behavior change. It is easy to end up more like Job's friends than like Job in the whirlwind (Job 38-42).

And as Wellspring's pastor, I see this happening before me. I see people who desire to know God settling for a vision of “discipleship” disconnected from the presence of God—a way of “faithfulness” that is wholly disconnected from God-encounter, the event of God's in-breaking presence contacting people in everyday life.<sup>29</sup> This, however,

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<sup>28</sup> John Starke captures this well when he writes, “I came to realize that what we as pastors in our city were feeling may not primarily be hostility, but indifference. Our neighbors were simply happy living for goals and pleasures that take no account of God or transcendence.” See John Starke, “Preaching in a Secular Age,” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 39, Kindle Edition. Similarly, Andrew Root explains that “Taylor points us to the possibility that our issue isn't necessarily people leaving the church but instead people no longer having ways to imagine the possibility of divine action or transcendence.” See Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Volume 1 (Ministry in a Secular Age): Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), Preface, Kindle Edition.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Horton makes a powerful comparison. He writes, “When the plague spread across England between 1348 and 1350, the Church of England called for periods of intense prayer and fasting. But in the 1990s, in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, the Church of England called for more government funding for medical research.” See Michael Horton, “The Enduring Power of the Christian Story: Reformation Theology for a Secular Age,” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 23, Kindle.

is only part of the challenge. How we see the world has changed but so has our understanding of the human person.

### **Living as a Buffered Self in an Age of Authenticity**

Charles Taylor unpacks this shift by contrasting our self-understanding to a person's self-understanding in a more "enchanted" time, long ago. Taylor writes, "The process of disenchantment is the disappearance" of the world of spirits, demons and the other forces.<sup>30</sup> In the enchanted world, the self was "porous" and "vulnerable" to these outside forces—the "boundary between agents and forces is fuzzy in an enchanted world."<sup>31</sup> In contrast, in a disenchanted world, the self is "buffered" or "bounded"—which creates an entirely different "existential condition."<sup>32</sup> For a "buffered self, the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind."<sup>33</sup> There is a sense of self, distinct from the world, that is me, within my mind—with its own "autonomous order."<sup>34</sup> Meaning, which used to exist in the world, now exists within the individual agent.<sup>35</sup>

Another feature of this landscape is the connection between the buffered self and belief in God. In an enchanted world, one is vulnerable and therefore God, as the supreme

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<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 36, 38, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 37-38. See also Taylor, "Afterword," 303.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 28-29.

being, is the “only thing that guarantees that in this awe-inspiring and frightening field of forces that good will triumph.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, “The prospect of rejecting God does not involve retiring to the safe redoubt of the buffered self, but rather chancing ourselves in the field of forces without him.”<sup>37</sup> The buffered self, thus existentially, “removes a tremendous obstacle to unbelief.”<sup>38</sup>

It also has tremendous impacts in the individual’s connection to community.<sup>39</sup> Taylor explains that the buffered self “lends itself to individuality, even atomism: sometimes we may wonder if it can be made hospitable to a sense of community.”<sup>40</sup> Why? Because, with the buffered self, “disengagement is frequently carried out in relation to one’s whole surroundings, natural and social.”<sup>41</sup> This is why Taylor calls the effects of the buffered self in the age of authenticity “the great disembedding.”<sup>42</sup>

In an enchanted world, this was not even an option. Defense against the dark forces was inherently “collective, deploying a power that we can only draw from as a community.”<sup>43</sup> Unlike our secular age, “the social bond at all levels was intertwined with

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<sup>36</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>39</sup> Alastair Roberts explains that “meaning” which, before the buffered self, “would once have been embedded in the external world and the community now withdraws into the individual self.” See Alastair Roberts, in “Liturgical Piety” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 66, Kindle.

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 41

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor, “Afterword,” 314.

<sup>43</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 42.

the sacred, and indeed, it was unimaginable otherwise.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, when someone went down the road of unbelief, there was a strong communal motivation to “bring him back into line”—not simply for his benefit but the benefit of the larger community.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast, as a buffered self, one’s beliefs are less connected to the social fabric. And I am more free to think, feel, and do as I wish—which paves the way to the age of authenticity in which people follow their own “spiritual instincts.”<sup>46</sup> Taylor explains, “I have to discover my own route to wholeness and spiritual depth. The focus is on the individual, and on his/her experience.”<sup>47</sup> And this is not without consequence.<sup>48</sup>

In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor writes, “The dark side of individualism is a centering on the self” which makes us “less concerned with others or society.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, the result of the “buffered self” is disconnection. But “it is not just that people sacrifice” their “relationships” in order “to pursue their careers. Something like this has always existed. The point is that today many people feel called to do this, feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they didn’t do it.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>46</sup> Root writes, “Martin Luther, for instance, opposed relics not because they were inauthentic tourist kitsch but because they offered an encounter with a transcendent reality contrary to the one presented in the Bible (and particularly the Pauline Epistles). There was little sense that one experience could be more authentic and genuine than another.” See Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 507.

<sup>48</sup> Root writes, “For us today, that which is authentic is more important than that which is holy, good, or righteous. What is lame and counterfeit, that which corrupts authenticity and keeps us from being real or genuine, making us a poser or a fraud, is worse than that which is evil, demonic, or perverse. It is better to be bad but authentic than to be good but phony.” See Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Press, 1991), 4.

The challenge, therefore, is to get people to choose community when it is not presumed, and even more deeply to choose community, even when one's "authentic expression" might guide a person in another direction. And this pivot toward community is important. Because, according to Taylor, "self-fulfillment, so far from excluding unconditional relationships actually requires" them.<sup>51</sup> The narrative of secularism presumes self-fulfillment, often disconnected from community, when, in fact, community is essential to flourishing.<sup>52</sup>

Applied at Wellspring this has profound implications. The intuitive and necessary connection between God and community has been severed. People at Wellspring live in a world where the individual is existentially alone, and therefore the call to deep and meaningful community, within the church at Wellspring, is often counterintuitive. Given this reality, what does it look like for Wellspring to choose community when, in the broader culture, it is not presumed and maybe even perceived a roadblock to self-fulfillment? What does it look like to help the people of Wellspring see community not as an obstacle to their authentic expression but, in fact, a necessary ingredient of their flourishing in Christ—when their friends, co-workers and others outside the church do

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 72-73. Though it is true that the buffered self in the age of authenticity may undermine community, it is important to point out that this does not "necessarily mean that the content will be individuating. Many people will find themselves joining extremely powerful religious communities. Because that's where many people's sense of the spiritual will lead them" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 516). Taylor's point is that the age of authenticity does not necessarily preclude community. But it is clear that the quest starts with the individual.

<sup>52</sup> Root writes that the church "is no longer a collective community that holds a broad identity but is instead a resource to help you (individually) finally find the authentic purpose you've been seeking." See Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age (Ministry in a Secular Age Book #2)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 138-139, Kindle Edition.

not carry this assumption? The air they breathe is individualism. It is not the interconnected community to which the Scriptures witness and God invites his church to embody.

This, however, is the final effect of secularism. When individuals, in the age of authenticity, begin following their own spiritual instincts the number of possible truths “out there” proliferate. And this, according to Taylor, affects everyone.

### **Navigating the Super Nova, Fragilization, and Cross-Pressures**

If you recall, within Taylor’s understanding of secularism, the secular is not necessarily about belief but contested belief. As people draw their own conclusions, based on their own stories, the number of competing truths in the world explodes like a super nova. Taylor writes, “We are now living in a spiritual super nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane.”<sup>53</sup> This, quite clearly, has numerous effects, including what Taylor calls the “fragilizing effect of pluralism.”<sup>54</sup>

What is vital to understand at this point is that all belief and unbelief is made more fragile. The very fact that “others think differently” undermines all belief (whether one is a theist or an atheist) because there is a nagging, “why my way, and not hers” at play.<sup>55</sup> Taylor calls this being “cross-pressured.”<sup>56</sup> It is when “we never move to a point

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<sup>53</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 555.

beyond all anticipation, beyond all hunches, to the kind of certainty.”<sup>57</sup> Smith writes, “Most of us live in this cross-pressured space, where both our agnosticism and our devotion are mutually haunted and haunting.”<sup>58</sup> Within secularism, belief is usually clouded by some doubt.

As one might imagine, this creates many challenges to gospel proclamation in Pacific Grove at Wellspring. God calls the church to be his faithful presence in the world, but when the church is so doubt-filled and questioning, it often retreats to learning (in the immanent frame) and an endless season of preparation—until people “feel” ready. But sadly, this time never arrives because the cross-pressures do not subside. Visions of the good life are always spawning new offspring. And, accordingly, distraction becomes more and more appealing. If belief is difficult to embrace with conviction, then why not watch another show on Netflix or play another round of a video game? When belief becomes increasingly complex, distraction becomes increasingly alluring as people attempt to mitigate the choice anxiety they feel.

It is important, however, to realize that while the cross-pressures are felt at Wellspring, they are also felt by the surrounding community of atheists and agnostics on the Monterey Peninsula. If Taylor is right and all belief (theism, atheism, agnosticism) is more fragile, then all “belief” (whatever one believes in) is affected.

This, ironically, creates an opportunity for Wellspring (and the church more generally) to be a robust faithful presence, an opportune witness, that speaks truth into the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 551.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 4.

challenge of secularism. Smith writes, “Almost as soon as unbelief becomes an option, unbelievers begin to have doubts—which is to say, they begin to wonder if there isn’t something ‘more.’”<sup>59</sup> As a “dissatisfaction with a life encased entirely in the immanent order” grows more pronounced, people look for the sacred.<sup>60</sup> Thus, there is an opportunity within the challenge of secularism.

If the people of Wellspring can cultivate dependence and a deep sense of community, it is possible that they could also be a faithful presence of the kingdom on the Monterey Peninsula. To do this, the people at Wellspring must find ways to God’s presence (in the immanent frame) and find ways to connect with one another (in an age of authenticity) so that they can embody God’s faithful presence in this surprising season of opportunity.

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<sup>59</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 61. Smith sees this “longing for more” at play even in the writing of secular writers like David Foster Wallace and poets like Mary Oliver. See Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 61. Taylor also notes a “sense of malaise, emptiness, a need for meaning” in the secular culture. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 302.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 506.



PART TWO  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter explores selected writings by scholars and theologians grappling with secularism. The first two works, *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor and *How (Not) To Be Secular* by James K.A. Smith, unpack the various elements of secularism and diagnose their impact. The third work, *Recapturing the Wonder* by Mike Cosper, explores how Christian disciplines affect one's posture within the immanent frame. In the fourth work, "Church Shopping with Charles Taylor" by Brett McCracken in *Our Secular Age*, edited by Collin Hansen, McCracken assesses how individualism shapes Christian expectations of church. And the final two works, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* by Alan Noble and *Faithful Presence* by David Finch, explore the possibilities of Christian witness in the secular West.

#### ***A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor**

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor brilliantly diagnoses the current philosophical and religious underpinnings of the secular West, and yet his meandering historical-

philosophical path to reach his conclusions clearly “needs supplementing.”<sup>1</sup> To begin, Taylor rightly believes that secularism is not a sudden subtraction story or spontaneously created in the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he argues that the secular West arose from “reform movements within Western Christianity” that took “an antireligious turn in the Enlightenment.”<sup>3</sup> By casting aside the “the traditional hierarchical distinction between the sacred and the secular, and thereby sanctifying the ordinary,” the Reformation created an alternative to Rome, thereby undermining the religious unity of Europe, creating the possibility of religious choice and forming a “context where the sacred could ultimately become secular.”<sup>4</sup>

Taylor’s path, however, is not a complete bridge to the present. In his attempt to build such a bridge, Taylor relies almost exclusively on the ideas of elites and how they shape the present “social imaginary of ordinary people.”<sup>5</sup> This approach is obviously

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Trueman, “Taylor’s Complex, Incomplete Historical Narrative,” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 17-18, Kindle Edition. One of the reasons that “philosophical history is rarely written these days” is because it “can’t well account for historical causality.” See Simon During, “Completing Secularism: The Mundane in the Neoliberal Era,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* ed. Michael Werner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, 105-125 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 2010), 109.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Werner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 2010), 1. Taylor rightly pushes back on subtraction stories to understand secularism. In this way, he parallels other scholars, including Talal Asad in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam and Modernity*. Oddly, Taylor never engages with Asad or many other global voices outside of Latin Christendom, including Saba Mahmood, Tomoko Masuwaza, Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, Rajeev Bhargava and others. See Werner, Vanantwerpen, and Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Werner, Vanantwerpen, and Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Trueman, “Taylor’s Complex, Incomplete Historical Narrative,” 14-15. Trueman also writes, “The idea of ‘choosing’ a church remains a profoundly Protestant idea, one that is confusing to traditional Roman Catholics.” See Trueman, “Taylor’s Complex, Incomplete Historical Narrative,” 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Trueman, “Taylor’s Complex, Incomplete Historical Narrative,” 17-18.

quite limited. Taylor clearly “neglects important material causes (most obviously capitalism and urbanization.)”<sup>6</sup> At its most basic level, the Reformation would not have taken place without the printing press and the political coalition of nobles, knights, merchants, and peasants that supported Luther against Rome.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the role of technology cannot be ignored. Colin Hansen explains “Technology in and of itself brings with it a certain ontology. It carries with it a sense of control, of power, of the ability to manipulate the world and overcome nature.”<sup>8</sup> While the printing press was central to the Reformation, the “advent of crop irrigation and fertilizers,” the “development of the birth-control pill,” as well as the invention of the automobile reinforce Taylor’s idea of the buffered self.<sup>9</sup> Hansen writes,

material conditions are crucial for how the self is constituted and understood. At no point in history has this point been more obvious than today. Mass media and information technology have transformed the way people think, feeding a consumerist mentality, emphasizing aesthetics, even mainstreaming pornography, which breaks down sexual taboos and commodifies people.<sup>10</sup>

Hansen’s point is that economics and technology “were, and are, critical components in forming the modern understanding of the self” and because of this “they must feature in any narrative that seeks to explain how and why the ideas of the intellectual elite come to shape the social imaginary as a whole.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> During, “Completing Secularism: The Mundane in the Neoliberal Era,” 109.

<sup>7</sup> Trueman, “Taylor’s Complex, Incomplete Historical Narrative,” 18.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

In addition, while it is reasonable for Taylor to concentrate on Latin Christendom, he does ignore the impact of Colonialism on the secular west. In *Varieties of Secularism*, Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun explain that “the colonial governance of non-Christian peoples was one of the central contexts in which Europeans developed their understanding of religion, the state and themselves.”<sup>12</sup> They explain that “the process by which Latin Christendom got to be secular was in large part the same as the process by which it got to be colonial.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is “analytically inadequate to frame the ‘internal’ history of Latin Christendom as though this process were not internal to it.”<sup>14</sup> This, as a result, leaves *A Secular Age* “oddly disengaged with the postcolonial conditions that have generated” the secular culture in which Taylor believes we live.<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, Charles Taylor diagnoses the current philosophical and religious underpinnings of the secular West, yet his meandering historical-philosophical path ignores major material, economic, and colonial developments that have shaped secularism as we know it.

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<sup>11</sup> Trueman, “Taylor’s Complex, Incomplete Historical Narrative,” 19-20. Trueman introduces Edward Bernays at this point in his argument to illustrate how mass marketing has affected society. He writes, “His genius was to sell products on the basis of desire, not function...Bernays as much as anyone is an architect of this secular age” because he is a “vital bridge between the elite and the masses” (19-20).

<sup>12</sup> Werner, Vanantwerpen, and Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 26-27.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 27. Many of Taylor’s critics ask whether communities that encountered “the secular through colonial domination: Hindus and Muslims in India, Muslims in much of the Arab world” might have a different understanding of the secular (26). Taylor, does in part, address this concern at the beginning of *A Secular Age*, when he explains that there are “multiple modernities” which “find rather different expression, and development under the pressures of different demands and aspirations in different civilizations” (26).

### ***How (Not) to be Secular* by James K.A. Smith**

James K.A. Smith, in *How (Not) to be Secular*, takes Charles Taylor's massive 900-page tome, *A Secular Age*, and offers the reader a shorter, more digestible 150-page summary. Smith believes that Taylor's *A Secular Age* is a "detailed existential relief map" of our cultural moment and his goal is to make Taylor's work more accessible to readers.<sup>16</sup>

First, following Taylor, Smith clarifies that "the 'secular' is not just the neutral, rational, areligious world that is left once we throw off superstition, ritual and belief in gods" or "simply a remainder it is a sum, created by addition."<sup>17</sup> Instead, he explains that "it's an age of believing otherwise."<sup>18</sup>

Second, having established that the secular age is an accomplishment, he then explores the development of exclusive humanism. Here he outlines the shift towards "immanentization," the subtle process by which our world, and hence the realm of significance, is enclosed within the material universe and the natural world."<sup>19</sup> Third, as the transcendence fades into the background, there is an "explosion of options for finding (or creating) 'significance'" (i.e., the nova effect).<sup>20</sup> And as options increase in both

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<sup>16</sup> James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 4, Kindle Edition.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 61.

“proximity and frequency” belief is fragilized as the pressure of which belief to embrace becomes increasingly subversive (what Taylor calls cross-pressures).<sup>21</sup>

This leads Smith to the Age of Authenticity and expressive individualism—in which “choice” and “tolerance” are of the highest import, creating a culture of “mutual display” where “the expressivist forges her own religion.”<sup>22</sup> And the question becomes not whether but how we “inhabit the immanent frame.”<sup>23</sup> Smith, at this point, riffing off of Taylor, wonders whether the challenge of the present is, in fact, “intensified for exclusive humanism, precisely because it can only admit the immanent: if the maximal demand is going to be met, it has to be met by us.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast, for the church, “Christian eschatology buys time to meet the maximal demand — time exclusive humanism doesn’t (can’t) have.”<sup>25</sup> This might be why both Smith and Taylor suggest that there is a longing under the surface of the secular west for “something more.”

As a summary of *A Secular Age*, Smith does a wonderful job breaking down Taylor’s 900-page tome. He covers Taylor’s major points and basic analysis. But, in reading both Taylor and Smith, one wonders whether Smith has removed the “feel” of *A Secular Age* in trying to convey its core message. Smith concedes that Taylor’s “existential map” is “buried in the long historical narrative and philosophical analysis”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 85-87.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 3.

of *A Secular Age*, and yet, he offers the reader a “brief, crisp overview that will serve as an invitation to unfold the larger, more detailed map.”<sup>27</sup> While in theory this is helpful, in fact, it may undermine the “feel” of Taylor’s project—which Smith, in his introduction, emphasizes.

Smith writes, “Ultimately Taylor wants to try to communicate what it feels like to live in a secular age, what it feels like to inhabit the cross-pressured space of modernity.”<sup>28</sup> Smith even quotes Colin Jager who believes that we need to treat *A Secular Age* “as if it were a literary text.”<sup>29</sup> If *A Secular Age* is intended to be read as a literary text, then wouldn’t a “cliff notes” version inherently lose the “feel” Taylor is creating? Can Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* be encapsulated into a summary? Wouldn’t one lose the “feel” of Raskolnikov’s internal conflict?

Smith, quoting Jager, writes, “When Taylor says he has a story to tell, he means that his account must be undergone, not simply paraphrased or glossed.”<sup>30</sup> But is not this the very thing that Smith attempts to do—to reduce the 900-page tome to a 150-page digestible summary? Moreover, Smith acknowledges that “akin to Alasdair MacIntyre and Christian Smith, Taylor seems to recognize that we are ‘narrative animals’: we define who we are, and what we ought to do, on the basis of what story we see ourselves in.”<sup>31</sup> And Taylor’s story in *A Secular Age* is long and meandering.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 17-19.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 24-25.



To explain this, Smith writes, “so we can’t tell a neat-and-tidy story” if we are “going to make sense of our muddled present, we need to get close to the ground and explore all kinds of contingent twists and turns that are operative in the background of our present.”<sup>32</sup> But again, isn’t this what Smith, in fact, does? He removes twists and turns and makes Taylor’s massive work “neat-and-tidy.” Therefore, while Smith does provide a wonderful information summary of Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, the very fact that he provides a “summary” may, in fact, undermine his primary purpose.

### ***Recapturing the Wonder* by Mike Cospers**

Mike Cospers, in *Recapturing the Wonder*, “set out to write a book about spiritual disciplines” and in the process found himself “in the midst of a fight.”<sup>33</sup> He unexpectedly found “the habits” “difficult to cultivate” for he has underestimated the pervasive ways in which the “world conditions us for doubt.”<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, Cospers attempts to write a book that both offers spiritual practices and a “sketch” of the “the spiritual landscape” of our “secular age” in “an effort at finding a path into a different way of life.”<sup>35</sup>

Cospers’s “sketch” is vivid and honest, capturing the “feel” of disenchantment through personal stories and thoughtful analysis. He explains that we feel “compelled to look for ways to live out a Christian life without transcendence and without the active

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>33</sup> Mike Cospers, *Recapturing the Wonder: Transcendent Faith in a Disenchanted World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 1-2, Kindle.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 4.

presence of God” as if “once the Bible was written, God left us to sort things out for ourselves.”<sup>36</sup> This is true, Cospers believes, despite the fact that we have access to an unlimited number of books on faith. With more information access than ever before, we feel “unable to pray, overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, and victim to the compulsive, distracting habits that fill our age.”<sup>37</sup> This is true, he argues, because we have learned the “disciplines of disenchantment.”<sup>38</sup>

Cospers clarifies, “We have embraced ways of living—habits, practices, and stories that we’re often unaware of—that prime us for disbelief and doubt.”<sup>39</sup> These unconscious rhythms undermine our faith. Therefore, he writes that we must begin with an exploration in “what those habits and practices are and how they work on us.”<sup>40</sup>

The second step, he explains “is embracing a different story and, with it, a different set of habits and practices.”<sup>41</sup> That, “if we want to leave behind our disenchantment, we have to find ways to immerse ourselves in these stories. We have to counter the stories of our disenchanted world.”<sup>42</sup> His hope is that these stories will enable us to “see through the shallow promises of our culture,” but to get here, again, Cospers believes that we “need rhythms, signposts, and practices that reorient us to another

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 28.

world.”<sup>43</sup> If we want to “experience the richness of life in God’s kingdom,” then “we must reorder our lives.”<sup>44</sup> This process of re-ordering, however, is not just about information—as if, a new book, conference or retreat could sort out our faith struggles.<sup>45</sup> Instead, Cospers emphasizes the need for concrete practices: marking time, the examen, Ignatian prayer, withdrawing, practicing abundance, fasting, generosity, feasting, and creating a rule of life.<sup>46</sup>

While each of these practices is insightful, Cospers seems to forget his own experience. A list of spiritual practices is wonderful if the person is motivated enough to apply them. This, however, gets at the root of the dilemma that Cospers himself encountered—the “the habits” are “difficult to cultivate” because of the “world conditions us for doubt,” disenchantment and settling for the God of deism.<sup>47</sup> And none of the practices that Cospers encourages seem to directly address motivation, hunger and desire.

This is surprising given that Cospers admits that desire is the pivotal: “once desire awakens, the soul knows a hunger that nothing else will satisfy.”<sup>48</sup> Here, Cospers is right. Hunger is everything. Thus, while Cospers does provide a helpful sketch of the secular landscape and offer excellent practices, he skips over the essential element—how to

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 28, 49, 70, 85, 104, 107, 132, 152.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 1-2

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 142.

cultivate hunger. The closest he comes is an off-hand “the Spirit reveals it to us.”<sup>49</sup> While it is true that “the disciplines reshape our awareness and perception, and that awareness has a way of growing roots and branches, expanding far beyond our ‘prayer time’ and into our whole lives,” the only way one will embrace and adopt the disciplines is if one is hungry and motivated.<sup>50</sup> One wonders if their might be low-bar practices that require little motivation but have massive motivation outputs. One wishes Cosper had spent more time exploring this idea.

Relatedly, one wonders where Christian community fits within Cosper’s vision for spiritual formation. How can the community provide motivation? How can the community help one embrace and embody the disciplines, even if the individual is not motivated? How does Paul’s call to burden bearing relate to the disenchantment and the ups and downs of life with God in a secular age?

One also wonders how the communal practices of a church community might helpfully challenge the social imaginary of the secular culture by creating a micro-culture in which the social imaginary includes the transcendent.<sup>51</sup> While the larger culture surely impacts the realm of what is assumed to be possible, clearly the local also speaks into these assumptions. For instance, what is the role of communal testimony in the spiritual disciplines? How might story sharing create possibility and desire?

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>51</sup> Taylor’s uses the term “social imaginary” to describe the “background” of assumptions of what is possible. See James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 34, Kindle.

In closing, while Cospers does an excellent job summarizing secularism and providing practices, he fails to address, what is possibly, the most important point: how to cultivate motivation and desire to apply the practices in a secular age.

### **“Church Shopping with Charles Taylor” by Brett McCracken**

In his essay “Church Shopping with Charles Taylor” in *Our Secular Age*, Brett McCracken explores the impact of expressive individualism within North American church culture. McCracken defines expressive individualism, as the attitude that “each one of us has his/ her own way of realizing our humanity.”<sup>52</sup> This, McCracken believes, positions “the individual as the primary arbiter of authority and meaning” and therefore “has wrought havoc on churches and religious institutions during the last several decades.”<sup>53</sup>

One reason that McCracken offers for the negative impact of expressive individualism on the church is that faith “becomes just another expression of identity that can be curated and enacted according to personal tastes and preferences and not according to any obligation or external expectation.”<sup>54</sup> This not only makes finding a church incredibly difficult, since “no church is ever going to be perfectly tailored to my preferences,” but likely will result in people giving “up the futile search entirely.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Brett McCracken, “Church Shopping with Charles Taylor” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* ed. Hansen, Collin (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 75, Kindle Edition.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 77-78. Quoting Taylor, he writes, “if the focus is going now to be on my spiritual path, thus on what insights come to me in the subtler languages that I find meaningful, then maintaining this or

It, however, gets worse. McCracken believes that by “accepting the consumerist terms of the Age of Authenticity” and “seeing themselves as another product to be branded and marketed and consumed,” churches “amplify the instability.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, since expressive individualism is “allergic” to “authority claims,” churches are faced with an additional dilemma: what guidance do they give, when it comes to believing and practicing the way of Jesus?<sup>57</sup> While Charles Taylor believes it is “wiser to stick with the present dispensation,” McCracken disagrees:<sup>58</sup>

Taylor (like a true academic) complicates either/or dichotomies and suggests there can be many different iterations and assemblages of faith in this new spiritual landscape. But is he correct that the Age of Authenticity’s free-floating, shallow, undemanding spirituality is simply a ‘deviation’ of our present moment, no more problematic than any of the previous deviations in Christian history? Or is it a fundamental undermining of the gospel itself? I believe it is the latter.<sup>59</sup>

McCracken believes that expressive individualism as it is currently expressed is a threat to the gospel. His primary point is that “Christianity requires the submission of one’s individual will to the lordship of Christ.”<sup>60</sup>

With that said, however, this does not mean that the church must be irrelevant. He explains, “Relevance can coexist with reverence, but the former should always be a

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any other framework becomes increasingly difficult.” See McCracken, “Church Shopping with Charles Taylor,” 77-78.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 512-513.

<sup>59</sup> McCracken, “Church Shopping with Charles Taylor,” 80.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 80.

byproduct of the latter. The most relevant thing about a church is its deep reverence and contagious awe before the triune God.”<sup>61</sup> Instead of pandering to the church consumer, McCracken argues that “pastors today should be mindful of what resonates broadly but not driven by the moving-target whims of the marketplace. They should be aware of the reality of church shoppers, but not always adjusting to fit the latest ‘consumer trend.’”<sup>62</sup> A “better approach,” according to McCracken, is to “call the congregation, in its diversity, to meet Christ where he is, even if it means asking people to redirect or abandon their various self-defined spiritual paths. The lordship of Christ, not the lordship of consumers, should always hold sway.”<sup>63</sup>

From a biblical perspective, McCracken is correct to encourage churchgoers to “not just look but land.”<sup>64</sup> He is also right to emphasize the sovereignty of Jesus in the process. He does, however, lack some nuance when it comes to the personal quest of expressive individualism. Of course, “it is impossible to simultaneously assert the sovereignty of one’s subjective spiritual path and the supremacy of Jesus Christ.”<sup>65</sup> But this does not mean that we do not have an authentic individual path to discern and walk.

In Ephesians 2:10, Paul writes, “God has made us what we are. God has created us in King Jesus for the good works that he prepared, ahead of time, as the road we must travel” (NTE). Andrew Lincoln in the Word Biblical Commentary suggests there is a

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 85-85.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 80.

sense of “destiny” here.<sup>66</sup> God has created every human being uniquely, with authentic good works in mind, that he or she is invited to walk. Lincoln explains, “the human activity of ‘walking’ is still necessary; the actual living out of God’s purpose in the world has to take place.”<sup>67</sup> Seen in this way, the “subjective path,” that McCracken resists, may not be as opposed to Christ’s supremacy as he assumes. While walking would still be submitted to Jesus, it would also be unique and authentic to the individual.

This same focus on authentic expression surfaces again in Romans 12—this time, within biblical community. James Dunn emphasizes, “The body is *one* not despite its diversity, but is *one body* only by virtue of its diversity; without that diversity the body would be a monstrosity.”<sup>68</sup> Hence, the diversity of the body adds to both the body’s functionality and well-being.<sup>69</sup> It is only “one (body in Christ) by virtue of (this) diversity.”<sup>70</sup>

Gordon Fee adopts a similar posture in 1 Cor 12. He explains that church health is not established through “uniformity” (the Corinthian model) “but diversity in the context of unity (God’s model).”<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Fee writes, “The eternal God who is characterized

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<sup>66</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 114.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 115–116.

<sup>68</sup> James Dunn, *Romans*, WBC 38B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 724–725.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 726.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 726.

<sup>71</sup> Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 646.



by diversity within unity has decreed the same for the people who are to bear God's likeness, the church."<sup>72</sup>

Thus, while McCracken's insights are helpful and instructive, they do not capture the thick texture of the biblical witness when it comes to the individual search. Surely, every Christian should submit to Jesus and commit to a local church. But the process of formation is not opposed to authentic expression.

***Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* by Alan Noble**

Alan Noble, in *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age*, explores what it looks like for the church to be ambassadors of the good news in a secular context. In part 1, Noble details the nuances of our cultural moment. He focuses on three elements that shape our secular age: the endless distractions, the buffered self, and nearly unlimited visions of fullness. In part two, Noble concentrates on what it looks like to bear a disruptive witness. In particular, he focuses on three arenas: personal habits, church practices, and cultural participation.

At the outset of *Disruptive Witness*, Noble explains how "our pervasive culture of technological distraction dramatically exacerbates the effects of the buffered self"<sup>73</sup>—by keeping us "from the kind of deep, honest reflection needed to ask why we exist and what is true."<sup>74</sup> Because of this, Noble argues that "the work of witnessing in the twenty-first

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 646.

<sup>73</sup> Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 3, Kindle Edition.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

century” is as much about our words as breaking up the hard cultural soil in which we live.<sup>75</sup> He writes, “Our task is to communicate our faith and the truths of our world in such a way as to disrupt our buffered and distracted culture.”<sup>76</sup>

This, however, will require new creativity because the listener has changed. Previous faith-sharing models have “assumed a listener who is active, attentive, and aware.”<sup>77</sup> Going forward, amidst all the distractions, “we can no longer make this assumption.”<sup>78</sup> Moreover, Noble believes that technological distraction “inclines us to look for meaning in preoccupation, novelty, consumer choices, and stimulation.”<sup>79</sup> As a result, “as we are moving on to the next thing, we feel that our life has some direction and therefore meaning.”<sup>80</sup>

In addition, living within the immanent frame, Noble explains that “modern people” look for “sources of fulfillment without recourse to any transcendent source.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, the people with whom Christians are invited to share the good news are both

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 6-7. More specifically, he writes, “The challenge for Christians in our time is to speak of the gospel in a way that unsettles listeners, that conveys the transcendence of God, that provokes contemplation and reflection, and that reveals the stark givenness of reality.” See Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 24-25. More concretely, Noble identifies three ways that our distraction effects communication. First, he thinks it “is easier to ignore contradictions and flaws in our basic beliefs.” Second, he thinks that we “are less likely to devote time to introspection,” and third “conversations about faith can be easily perceived as just another exercise in superficial identity formation” (25).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 62.

distracted and looking for “earthly” solutions and answers—not transcendent proclamations. In the secular west, people “gain meaning and justification in life” through “self-expression,” not grand meta-narratives.”<sup>82</sup> Because of this, Noble believes that disruption is the key to witness.

Accordingly, Noble spends the latter half of *Disruptive Witness* focused on disruptive personal habits, church practices, and cultural participation. Writing first to the individual, Noble invites Christians to a posture of self-examination and silence, a thoughtful exegesis of other people’s beliefs, and a willingness to pray, while hosting unbelievers, before meals.<sup>83</sup> He invites believers to embrace a “double movement” in all of life: to acknowledge “goodness, beauty, and blessing wherever we encounter them” and then turn that “goodness outward to glorify God.” Such a rhythm, he believes, “challenges the secular assumption of a closed, materialist universe.”<sup>84</sup>

Importantly, though, Noble writes that “the greatest witness to the world will always be the body of Christ gathered to worship.”<sup>85</sup> It is not the individual but the church which has the greatest potential for disruption. Because of this, Noble argues that the church “must abandon practices adopted from the secular marketplace that trivialize our faith,”<sup>86</sup> and embrace practices that “challenge life in a closed immanent frame,”

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 80-82, 104, 111.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 88.

especially prayer, the Lord's supper, and Advent.<sup>87</sup> The church must focus on worship of God, not catering to the whims of men and women trapped in the immanent frame.

With that said, while Noble invites the church to remain faithful to God through worship, he also encourages the church to engage the culture, especially where the cross-pressures of our cultural moment are most keenly felt. He believes that the church should focus on "aesthetically excellent stories, whether or not they are the most popular."<sup>88</sup> These stories, he realizes, will "tend to be darker or more depressing or heavy" but he believes that "Christians should be known for their appreciation of tragedies, because in good tragedies we must reckon with our place in the world, the problem of evil, and the struggle for meaning."<sup>89</sup> It is here, where the culture wrestles with difficulty, that Noble is convinced Christians can communicate the gospel to more open and attentive listeners.

While this likely is the case (that people are more open where they are cross-pressured), one wonders, having read *Disruptive Witness*, whether Noble underestimates the importance of communal spiritual formation in effective witness. For instance, while self-examination, silence, and the double-movement are wonderful practices that are essential to becoming a disruptive witness in the world, it is unclear how these personal habits intersect with a communal rule of life. One wonders whether these individual practices are sufficient (without the buttressing of a robust communal commitment) to

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 141. Noble believes that Americans are especially open to the transcendent during the season of Advent (134).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 157-158.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 157-158.

sustain a believer's faith as she enters into dialogue within the cross-pressures of the secular West.

This is even more true as Noble leans into cultural disruption. As a community, the church can engage culture, specifically movies, books and stories where the anxieties and struggles of our age are most poignant.<sup>90</sup> But almost certainly, as the church engages individuals will be involved, talking with friends and neighbors, and these conversations will be filled with doubt and disenchantment.

David Finch, in *Faithful Presence*, explains that when churches encourage people into these cross-pressured spaces “they are prone to being absorbed by the systems of the broader culture.”<sup>91</sup> Mark Sayers, in *Disappearing Church* warns that, too often, when Christians are sent into cross-pressured secular environments the Christians are “colonized” because the secular “culture is just as evangelistic” as the Christian one.<sup>92</sup> Secularism has a “great mission to prohibit anyone from prohibiting” and therefore “seeks to propagate its dogma that there should be no dogma.”<sup>93</sup> Sadly, while the church is trying to disrupt the assumptions of its secular audience, it is not the secular friend's “faith” that is disrupted but the churchgoer's.

This is not to say that Noble is wrong to encourage the church in this direction. Surely, he is correct. But one wonders whether he is missing a key communal element in

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 157-168.

<sup>91</sup> David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 13-14, Kindle.

<sup>92</sup> Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2016), 47, Kindle.

<sup>93</sup> Sayers, *Disappearing Church*, 47.

this process. As the church engages culture, it needs to be together on the mission, praying for one another, supporting one another, and encouraging one another. If the church is called to be a disruptive witness (and clearly it is), then there needs to be a more robust relational support network to help individuals and the church remain faithful to Jesus as they disrupt the world. Jesus does not send the disciples out one by one, after he ascends into heaven. He sends them, as a body, to be his witnesses in the world. The church should take seriously that example. It must disrupt but be also protect against its own disruption.

### ***Faithful Presence* by David Fitch**

David Fitch, in *Faithful Presence*, describes the “reality that God is present in the world” and that “he uses a people faithful to his presence to make himself concrete and real amid the world’s struggles and pain.”<sup>94</sup> Importantly, Fitch believes that “faithful presence is not only essential for our lives as Christians, it’s how God has chosen to change the world.”<sup>95</sup>

Fitch argues, however, that it is not enough for individuals to try and be God’s “faithful presence in their spheres of influence.”<sup>96</sup> When churches adopt this strategy, Fitch writes, individuals “become isolated in the world” and are likely to be “absorbed by the systems of the broader culture and then lose their distinctiveness.”<sup>97</sup> Because of this,

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<sup>94</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 10.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 10.

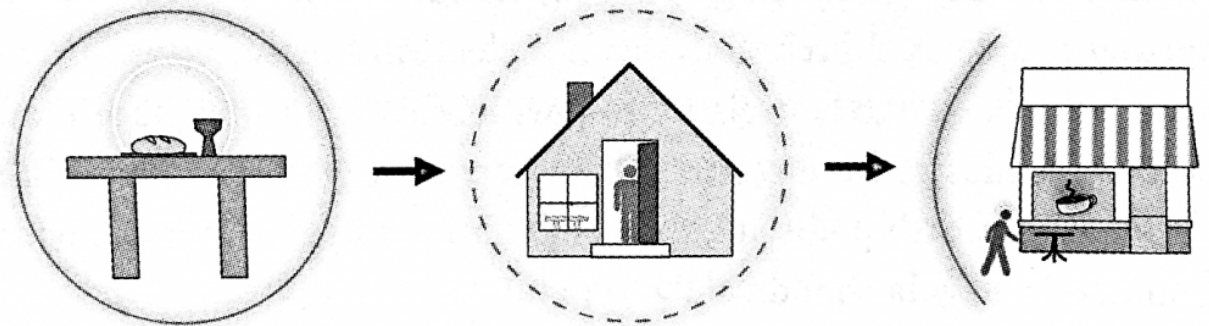
<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

he believes that the church must “be a communal reality before it can infect the world. It must take shape as a whole way of life in a people.”<sup>98</sup>

With this in mind, Fitch invites the church to adopt a communal “set of disciplines” to “shape Christians” into Christ-like communities.<sup>99</sup> For him, the disciplines become the “entry points into the new reality God has begun in the world through Jesus Christ”—they make the church’s “faithful presence a live social possibility” as churches inhabit their neighborhoods and workplaces “with the kingdom of God.”<sup>100</sup>

For Fitch, it is vital to understand, though, that these disciplines are not simply for Christians (and their personal closeness to God) but intimately connected to their embodiment of God’s faithful presence in the world. Fitch communicates this multifaceted and fluid understanding of the disciplines using figure 2.1 below:



**Figure 2.1.** The close, dotted, and half circles

To begin with, for Fitch, the closed circle on the left represents a “close circle of

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 14.

committed subjects to Christ.”<sup>101</sup> This is the first space in which the disciplines are practiced. Here, Christians gather to celebrate the Lord’s Table, care for each other’s children, reconcile and pray for one another. In this tight-knit space, “the intensity of the presence of Christ is known like nowhere else.”<sup>102</sup> But the disciplines are not simply for Christians. They also shape us for life in “the neighborhood” (the middle icon).

Fitch explains, “This space is represented as a dotted circle because, even though this space is still defined by a circle of committed followers of Jesus, there is space for neighbors and strangers to enter in and watch what God is doing.”<sup>103</sup> Here, Fitch believes, as an example, the discipline of Lord’s Table shapes believers to host their neighbors in such a way that the presence of Jesus is made known. Just as Christ hosts the Christian community in the “close circle,” so now the Christian community hosts the “world”—as a faithful presence. The same is true for all seven disciplines that Fitch highlights—they are practiced in the “close circle” and then embodied in the neighborhood.

But, as the icon illustrates, there is more. Fitch, using the third icon, shows the many places where the Christian “extends the special presence of Christ into the world,” discerning “Christ’s presence as a guest among the hurting and the wandering.”<sup>104</sup> The shift from host to guest is key. How one embodies the discipline of caring for “the least of these” or proclaiming the gospel changes as one goes from host to guest.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 41-42



With this model in mind, Fitch cautions against retreating into the “close circle” (what he calls maintenance mode) or forever extending towards the half-circle (what he calls exhaustion mode).<sup>105</sup> He believes that the faithful Christian experiences and embodies the presence of Jesus in all three areas of life. In this way, Fitch presents a balanced and nuanced perspective on formation. One wonders, however, where, in the midst of practicing these disciplines, one learns to discern Christ’s presence. Fitch warns that that if we focus too much on mission (the half circle) that “we lose the wherewithal to discern his presence in the world.”<sup>106</sup> But he never provides concrete tools for practicing discernment in the midst of embodying the disciplines.

Just as Fitch believes that Hunter, in *How to Change the World*, “runs out of space” before “he can flesh out what the actual practice of faithful presence might look like,” one wonders whether Fitch also does not “flesh out” what it looks like to concretely discern Christ’s presence.<sup>107</sup> Fitch consistently emphasizes how the practices “shape” one into Christ’s presence,<sup>108</sup> but he also argues that Christians should be “tending to his presence,”<sup>109</sup> and that the practices themselves create “open space” for “Christ’s

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<sup>105</sup> Fitch explains that “maintenance mode” is “when we separate what happens in the close-circle gathering from the rest of life” and stop “engaging the surrounding neighborhoods of God’s presence. We can even become insulated and defensive.” “Exhaustion Mode” is the other extreme. It is when we “focus entirely on the half circles of our lives and disregard the close circle of his presence” and “close ourselves off from the very foundation of God manifesting himself in the world” and become “exhausted” (41-42).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 27.

presence.”<sup>110</sup> But Fitch never provides tools for the reader to “tend” or walk through that open door? He invites us to submit and let go but does not provide any concrete practices for us to learn what that feels like.<sup>111</sup> Yes, he provides helpful and insightful stories but that cannot replace concrete discernment training.

For instance, when one celebrates the Lord’s Supper or spends time with children, what is the personal or communal process by which the individual or group discerns Jesus’ presence? After hanging out with children, as an example, does the group do an “examen”—asking where they sensed the presence of Jesus during their time together? Essentially, how does one learn to discern in the midst of the disciplines themselves if the disciplines are meant to shape us into a faithful presence and be the means through which we encounter God’s presence in our lives.

In conclusion, Fitch provides excellent practices and a nuanced understanding of community and mission. However, *Faithful Presence* is missing a needed chapter in discerning Jesus’ presence in the world. For, without the ability to discern, then much of Fitch’s theology loses its on-the-ground power.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 99, 135.

<sup>111</sup> While Finch offers seven disciplines, he begins with the founding principle of mutual submission. He explains, “mutual submission is a founding principle of the kingdom” and it “runs through all of the disciplines.” See Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 38.

## CHAPTER 3

### BIBLICAL THEOLOGY IN A DISENCHANTED SECULAR AGE

The goal of this chapter is to focus on the biblical narrative and how it speaks into and challenges core assumptions of secularism. First, it explores how the biblical narrative challenges the immanent frame. It does this in two ways. It begins by focusing on how God is both transcendent as well as breaks into and dwells within the immanent frame. Next, it explores how the biblical focus on an everlasting kingdom challenges the “YOLO” optic of secularism.

Second, it focuses on a biblical understanding of community. More concretely, it explores the contours of New Testament community and leans into the relationship between individualism, authenticity, and community within the church. Third, it highlights the church’s call to be a faithful presence in the world as well as explores the possibility that the fragilization and cross-pressures of secularism might provide an opportunity for the church’s witness in the world.

#### **God’s Presence and the Immanent frame**

The culture of the secular West assumes the absence of God within the immanent frame. In fact, some argue that “secularism is the attempt to create a system for human

flourishing in which the presence of God is absent.”<sup>1</sup> And yet, while this may be true within a secular framework, the Bible presents a very different reality. The Bible presents “a God-bathed and God-permeated world”—a “world that is inconceivably beautiful” because “God is always in it.”<sup>2</sup>

From Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures tell the story of God’s presence.<sup>3</sup> And his presence is primarily revealed through “events” and encounters recorded in the biblical narrative.<sup>4</sup> Andrew Root, in *Pastor in a Secular Age*, explains “Because God arrives as an event in history, God identifies with events” and these events reveal “God’s identity.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, “there is no way of talking about God disconnected, and cordoned off, from God’s action. We can only know God as God has chosen to reveal himself, and this is always within a history of encounter.”<sup>6</sup>

In large part, this is what one finds in the biblical narrative—a catalogue of these encounters in history when God breaks through the immanent frame and dwells with his people. God is much more than an idea. God is “an event of arriving, a personal being that shows up. To Israel, God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a living, personal

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<sup>1</sup> Mark, Sayers, *Reappearing Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2019), 83, Kindle.

<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1998), 61.

<sup>3</sup> David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 24, Kindle.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age (Ministry in a Secular Age Book #2)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 202, Kindle Edition. Root explains that the only way we “know anything about this God is to rehearse these events in the only form we have—story” (202).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

God who moves in history, making God's identity (who God is) bound to acts in time and space."<sup>7</sup>

Consider Genesis One. In the beginning, God "creates the world and at the same time enters into it. He calls it into existence, and at the same time manifests himself through its being."<sup>8</sup> The event of creation reveals the presence of God. He makes all things and then enters into the particularly of Eden. God is not camped outside the immanent frame but creates the universe and then enters into it.

Moreover, having given Adam life, he does not then tell him "you do you"—as if expressive humanism were the goal. He is not a disinterested deistic god but a loving and engaged creator. He gives Adam words to live by and a companion with whom to live (Gen 2:16-18). He sets parameters and provides community within the immanent frame so that they can flourish. This event, as Root explains, reveals God's identity to us. God is a transcendent creator who breaks into and dwells within the immanent frame. This is true before the fall, and it is equally true after it.

When humanity goes its own way, God does not abandon them. He does not disappear into the sky. He calls out to them (Gen 3:9). And when he finds them, the same hands which made the heavens make clothes for Adam and Eve (Gen 3:21). In Eden, before and after the fall, God dwells with his creation. Though humanity is kicked out of Eden, God is not trapped on the other side of the immanent frame. He continues to enter

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 201-202.

<sup>8</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 15. He writes, "in order to create a world 'outside' himself, the infinite God must have made room beforehand for a finitude in himself. It is only a withdrawal by God into himself that can free the space into which God can act creatively" (86.)

into creation and interact within it. God “had regard” for Abel’s offering (Gen 4:4-5), and when Cain kills his brother “God at once intervenes.”<sup>9</sup>

It is abundantly clear in the Scriptures that God is not stuck on the “other side” of the immanent frame. God asks Noah to build a boat for the flood; he undermines the work of Babel; he calls Abraham and promises to make him into a nation;<sup>10</sup> he brings Joseph into a unique position with the Egyptian Empire to rescue Abraham’s line; he calls Moses and responds to the Hebrew people’s “misery” in Egypt (Ex 3:7).

Having freed the Hebrew people, he gives them guidelines and rules to live by.<sup>11</sup> God “walks” with his people in the wilderness by a pillar of cloud during the day and guides them by a fire at night (Ex 13:21). He dwells with Israel in the Tabernacle (Ex 25:8) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10-13). God’s “presence is so viscerally real” that Moses even teaches the people how to “approach God.”<sup>12</sup>

The stories in the Old Testament consistently testify to God’s presence among his people. Mark Sayers writes,

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<sup>9</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia, PN: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 34.

<sup>10</sup> Root explains, “For the rest of Abraham’s life this God will be coming and going, arriving with a word, seemingly gone, arriving again with a word. Abraham experiences this living God as the event of arrival, as the one who comes with a word, changing Abram to Abraham.” See Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 182. Dallas Willard agrees: “heaven’ is never thought of as far away—in the clouds perhaps, or by the moon. It is always right here, ‘at hand.’” See Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> Willard writes, “God spoke to Moses from heaven in the presence of the people of Israel while giving the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20), and thundered from heaven upon the enemies of Israel during battle (1 Sam 7:10). On numerous occasions fire materialized out of the air (Gen 15:17; Exod 13:21; 1Kings 18:38; 2 Kings 1:10; 1Chron 21:26, etc.) The manifestation in atmospheric fire became almost a routine event in Israel’s history, so much so that God came to be known as a consuming fire (Heb12:29).” See Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 22.

The story of the Old Testament—from the story of God sacrificing animals for their skins to cover Adam and Eve’s shame, His appearance to Moses in a burning bush and on a mountain, His dwelling in the holiest of holies in the tabernacle and temple, to the cries of prophets both major and minor for His return—this is the story of God’s plan to flood the world with His presence.<sup>13</sup>

God’s presence is experienced so often and so powerfully in the Old Testament that the prayers of the Psalter are full of people praising God for his presence among them. The psalmist, in Ps 139:7-12, asks “Where can I go to escape your presence? Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Ps 137:7-10). The psalmist knows that God will reveal himself—no matter the obstacle. And this becomes even more clear when one shifts to the New Testament.

In the words of Dallas Willard, “The incarnation in the person of Jesus is the most complete case” for God’s presence “with us.”<sup>14</sup> The transcendent creator God of the universe enters into human life.<sup>15</sup> He is not trapped on the other side of the immanent frame—powerless to act on planet earth. This is obvious in the Gospels and especially clear in the first chapter of John’s Gospel. John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1), and then in v. 14, he makes the profound statement that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” In the

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<sup>13</sup> Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 69. Mark Sayers expands upon this when he writes, “Jesus is therefore not just God’s presence amongst us. He is God’s redemptive presence, sent to renew us, to complete God’s goal of moving history toward His full presence.” See Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> John 1:1-2 reads, “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us.”

event of the incarnation, God reveals himself. God is present. He teaches, heals, leads, and even dies for humanity. God enters into and dwells within the immanent frame.

Given this clear focus on God's presence, in both the Old Testament and the Gospels, it should not be surprising that when Jesus ascends to be with the Father, he sends his Spirit to remain with his people (Mt 28)—he promises to be with them wherever they go. Just as he breathed life into Adam, so he breathes his Spirit on the disciples (John 20:22). Just as he dwelled within the tabernacle, so he dwells within his people (1 Cor 6:19). God “extends his own presence by giving of the Holy Spirit to his people”<sup>16</sup> so that “the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit” can “now take His presence across the world.”<sup>17</sup>

This dynamic is powerfully captured in the life of Paul. In fact, it is because Paul encounters the presence of God on the road to Damascus that he becomes a carrier of the gospel (and God's presence) throughout the Greco-Roman world. Root writes, “This encounter is something more than natural and material...Paul encounters not a clairvoyant essence or ghostly substance but the very personhood (the transcendent person) of Jesus himself.”<sup>18</sup> And it is this encounter with the transcendent creator God that shapes Paul's faith.

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<sup>16</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 102.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Volume 1 (Ministry in a Secular Age): Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 137, Kindle Edition.



For Paul, “to believe is not to hold or to commit to information that qualifies you as a member, but it is to trust experience. It is to follow the experience of the living Christ, who comes to minister to you.”<sup>19</sup> Belief is not simply about ideas or information but is shaped by one’s encounter with the personhood of God—a God who enters the contours and fissures of human life and reveals himself.<sup>20</sup>

For Paul, to be “in Christ” is therefore, is “not a concept.”<sup>21</sup> Paul “encounters not a new idea but the very person of the living Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Through the event of God’s arrival on the road to Damascus, Paul knows the presence of God. And this shapes his teaching throughout the New Testament. Paul is less concerned with fact memorization than encounters with God that shape a new way of being in the world—where the presence of God is alive and active. For Paul, the spiritual life is an “open system” which presupposes “God’s surprises.”<sup>23</sup>

Given that God has been present from creation through the age of the church, it should not be surprising that the biblical narrative ends with God dwelling with humanity on earth. John, in Revelation 21, sees a “new heaven and a new earth” and hears “a loud

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<sup>19</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 136.

<sup>20</sup> Root believes that this encounter-focused understanding has profound implications in a world shaped by the immanent frame. He writes, “The experiential as the center of Paul’s encounter with the living Jesus gives us a way to push back against the immanent bias of Secular 3. In the age of authenticity, our experiences equal our reality. But because they are our experiences, they can be doubted and never presumed to hold direct normative weight for anyone else. In the age of authenticity I will always allow you to have your experience, but until I have an experience myself, it will make little demand on me.” See Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 136-137.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>23</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 86, Kindle Edition.

voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.’” On that day, the transcendent God of the universe will finally destroy any illusions about the immanent frame and dwell with humanity on earth. And at that time, it will be crystal clear that “nothing—no human being or institution, no time, no space, no spiritual being, no event—stands between God and those who trust him.”<sup>24</sup> Humans are not separated from God as secularism presumes. As the biblical narrative makes clear, God’s “presence is at the core of his work among his people.”<sup>25</sup> And his kingdom is forever.

### **The Everlasting Kingdom and the Immanent Frame**

Secularism not only assumes that God is trapped on the other side of the immanent frame (in direct contradiction to the biblical witness), but also presumes that human life only exists on a continuum between biological birth and death. Now, in some ways, this belief can be grounded in Old Testament texts that suggest a rather “negative view of the afterlife.”<sup>26</sup>

For instance, the psalmist says to God, in the sixth psalm, “In death there is no remembrance of you,” implying that when one dies one is not with God but simply dead (Ps 6:5).<sup>27</sup> Other texts, however, present a more ambiguous picture. Jacob is “gathered to

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<sup>24</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 67.

<sup>25</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *A New Picture of Heaven and Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 135.

<sup>27</sup> Examples include Ps 6:5; 30:9; 89:48; 88:4-5,10-12; 115:17.

his fathers” (Gen 49:33). And others prayers state a positive outlook: “God will redeem my soul from the grave” (Ps 49:15), and God will “take” me “into glory” (Ps 73:24).<sup>28</sup> As a whole these Old Testament texts do not present a unified vision of the life after death. With Job, one wonders, after reading them, “If a man dies, will he live again” (Job 14:14)?

This confusion, however, is eliminated definitively in the New Testament. Stanley Grenz, in *Theology for the Community of God*, writes, “For the New Testament authors, viewing death in the light of Jesus’ resurrection eliminated all ambiguity.”<sup>29</sup> In the New Testament, God’s kingdom is clearly eternal and his people get to “look beyond death to an eternal future in God’s presence.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the New Testament unequivocally challenges the life expectations of secularism. According to the New Testament, eternity starts now.

Dallas Willard writes, “The kingdom is not something to be ‘accepted’ now and enjoyed later but something to be entered now.”<sup>31</sup> Jesus did not tell people to sit around and wait for a future kingdom but instead said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:7). Jesus invites his listeners to enter into his eternal kingdom now.

Importantly, however, the present reality of the kingdom does not undermine its eternal nature. Jesus “shows his apprentices how to live in the light of the fact that they

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<sup>28</sup> Hosea 13:14, Dan 12:1-3, and Isa 26:19 seem to suggest future resurrection as well.

<sup>29</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 579.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 582. He continues to explain, “The good news of the gospel is that our existence does not necessarily end in death” (573).

<sup>31</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 28. See Mt 5:20, Mt 18:3, and Jn 3:3-5.

will never stop living.”<sup>32</sup> Jesus is not teaching the disciples to live in a future kingdom, but to awaken to the reality that they are living in an eternal kingdom that will never end.<sup>33</sup>

Jesus’s focus on people’s present response to the kingdom is shaped, in part, by his awareness of a future and eternal judgement. He teaches, “For an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29). Jesus knows that he will return to judge the earth and those who have aligned their life with the kingdom will get to enjoy eternal life in God’s kingdom. This kingdom may arrive while one is living or after one has died. Either way, eternity awaits.<sup>34</sup>

If one dies before Jesus’ return, the New Testament suggests that one goes to be “with Christ” in spirit even though one’s “body remains dead.”<sup>35</sup> This state is like an interim period before Jesus returns to make all things new. Understood in this way, the Bible describes a “two-step belief about the future: first, death and whatever lies

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>33</sup> American Evangelist Dwight Moody once said, “One day soon you will hear that I am dead. Do not believe it. I will then be alive as never before.” Additionally, Bonhoeffer, before being killed, told his friend, “This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life.” See Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Randy Alcorn, *Heaven: A Comprehensive Guide to Everything the Bible Says About Our Eternal Home* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 54, Kindle Edition.

<sup>35</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006), 218-219. N.T. Wright explains, “When they did speak of heaven as a postmortem destination, they seemed to regard this heavenly life as a temporary stage on the way to the eventual resurrection of the body.” See N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2008), 41.

immediately beyond; second, a new bodily existence in a newly remade world.”<sup>36</sup>

While the details of this interim period are less clear in the New Testament, the eternal future of creation is distinct and straight forward. And it is because of this hope and the eternal nature of kingdom life that Christians are challenged to look beyond the immanent frame for guidance and life direction. Peter writes, in 2 Pet 3:10-13,

The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

The promises to which Peter refers, “unless perceived through existentialist glasses or interpreted as symbols for that which is beyond history and hence indescribable, are scarcely intelligible apart from belief in a literal end or renewal of the world.”<sup>37</sup> Peter believed that Jesus was going to establish his eternal kingdom on earth and warns the Christians to base their lives on it.

Similarly, Paul encourages the Corinthians to be “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord” because life is eternal and Jesus’ is returning (1 Cor 15:58).<sup>38</sup> Paul is certain that Jesus has “destroyed death and has brought life and

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<sup>36</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Dale C. Allison, *The End of the Age has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PN: Fortress Press, 1985), 107.

<sup>38</sup> In 1 Cor 15, Paul responds to critics in Corinth who doubted the resurrection and its centrality on their lives dedicates. He argues that since Jesus died and was resurrected, Christians will also be have a physical existence in an “incorruptible” body. See Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 44.

immortality to light through the gospel” (2Tim 1:10).<sup>39</sup> Quite clearly, YOLO is not Paul’s slogan. His hope is in solidly founded in Jesus’ eternal Kingdom.

This future hope of an eternal kingdom is the only way to make sense of the “starting disregard Jesus and the New Testament writers” have for physical death.<sup>40</sup> Because they knew that Jesus was preparing a place for them (John 14), they live based on the assumptions God’s promise, not “YOLO.”

Thus, Dallas Willard writes, “We may be sure that our life—yes, that familiar one we are each so well acquainted with—will never stop. We should be anticipating what we will be doing three hundred or a thousand or ten thousand years from now in this marvelous universe.”<sup>41</sup> For, we are “never-ceasing spiritual beings with an eternal destiny in the full world of God.”<sup>42</sup>

This is profoundly important because the background assumption of the secular age is that people should live for purely immanent goals.<sup>43</sup> But if our life in God’s kingdom is eternal, then the assumptions of secularism (and the immanent frame in particular) are directly challenged. And the same is true when the Scriptures speak into secularism’s promotion of radical individualism.

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<sup>39</sup> 1 Cor 15:54-55 has a similar feel.

<sup>40</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 84.

<sup>41</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 86.

<sup>42</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 86.

<sup>43</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 143.

## Biblical Community and Radical Individualism

Living in the secular West, “the focus is on the individual, and on his/her” authentic “experience.”<sup>44</sup> Root writes, “That which is authentic is more important than that which is holy, good, or righteous...It is better to be bad but authentic than to be good but phony.”<sup>45</sup> Individual expression is so highly valued that it is better to be authentic than connected to others in meaningful community.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, the biblical narrative, while making room for the individual and her unique journey, also underlines the need for and importance of community.

Joseph Hellerman, in *When the Church Was a Family*, explains that people in the secular West “have been socialized to believe that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group—our church or our family, for example—to which we belong.”<sup>47</sup> But this posture towards community is “markedly different” than “the world in which Jesus and His followers lived.”<sup>48</sup> Whereas secular culture values the individual, the culture of the Bible, and Jesus more specifically, was “a distinctly strong-group culture in which the health of the group—not the needs of the individual—received first priority.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 507.

<sup>45</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor, “Afterword,” 314.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2009), 4, Kindle Edition.

<sup>48</sup> Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 6.

To appreciate this difference, it is important to return to the stories that shaped the Hebrew people. For instance, reading Gen 1 the positivity is robust—creation is good both in part and as a whole. And this is what makes God’s response to Adam’s lack of relational connection so shocking in Genesis 2:18, when he says, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Everything in creation is good, except man being alone. G.J. Wenham remarks, “The divine observation that something was not right with man’s situation is startling. It alerts the reader to the importance of companionship for man.”<sup>50</sup> God has the ability to promote radical individualism by leaving Adam alone. But this is not what happens. In fact, God highlights the need for human companionship by not simultaneously creating Adam and Eve.<sup>51</sup>

The radical individualism of secular life is undermined in Genesis and it is consistently challenged throughout the Hebrew Bible. After the flood, God forms “a covenant community” through Abraham and his descendants.<sup>52</sup> At first glance, Abraham’s call might seem to reinforce radical individualism. God calls Abraham from his country, people and father’s house (Gen 12:1)—and therefore away from community. But this is not God’s goal. In fact, God calls Abraham away from his people in order to

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<sup>50</sup> G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Dallas TX: Word, 1987), 68.

<sup>51</sup> While the creation of Eve as “Adam’s helper” has been interpreted many ways throughout history, it is important to state this does not make her Adam’s servant—created to prepare meals and clean up after Adam. It does not necessitate that the helper is weaker. It concretely and profoundly implies that “the latter’s strength is inadequate by itself.” Moreover, Wenham argues, “The help looked for is not just assistance in his daily work or in the procreation of children, though these aspects may be included, but the mutual support companionship provides.” See Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 68.

<sup>52</sup> Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement: Living Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 27, Kindle Edition.



form a new community through him. The call “away” becomes a call “to.” God says to Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3). The calling and blessing of the individual was directly connected to the formation and the calling of the community. Through the blessing of Abraham, the community was formed, and its calling was clarified—to be a blessing to the nations.

The calling of Moses has a similar shape. In Exodus 3, God reveals himself to Moses in the wilderness. And yet, though Moses is alone God identifies himself as the God of a community—“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6). God connects Moses to “the faith of Moses’ family in Egypt” and “the faith of Moses’ people, the sons of Israel.”<sup>53</sup> God helps Moses see the connection between his spiritual life and his people (the community).

This becomes even more apparent as God speaks to Moses from the burning bush. In verse 7, God says to Moses, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt.” God identifies the enslaved Hebrew people as “his people.” And then later, in verse 10, he connects the calling of Moses with the larger community of God: “So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” God desires to bring his people “out of Egypt” so that he can form them into a community in the wilderness and shaped by the law.

In the New Testament, a similar focus on community is evident. Jesus does not select and meet with disciples one-on-one. He begins his ministry by forming a

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<sup>53</sup> J.I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1987), 31.

community—a new and restored Israel.<sup>54</sup> Just as God formed a community in the Old Testament, so he forms a community in the New Testament. To reinforce this communal perspective, “Jesus decides to express his whole vision in one phrase” the “kingdom of God”—the “society wherein God's will is established and practiced.”<sup>55</sup> The society, however, is “far more than a collection of saved individuals who band together for the task of winning the lost. The church is the community of salvation.”<sup>56</sup>

This communal vision is established by Jesus and reinforced by those who follow him, especially Paul—who worked passionately to “establish spiritually vibrant, relationally healthy communities of believers in strategic urban settings throughout the Roman Empire.”<sup>57</sup> More specifically, he teaches that the church is like a body—that the church community is so intimately connected with one another that is “one body in Christ” and the individuals within the body “are members one of another” (Ro 12:4-5). Unpacking these verses James Dunn explains that for Paul, “The gospel is bound to have a corporate expression” and an inevitable “communal character.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> R.A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, WBC 34A (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 157. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, 158. Guelich explains, “Obviously, the number twelve relates to Israel, historically a nation of twelve tribes. But how? The Twelve could hardly have served as representatives of historic Israel (cf. Num 1:4–17; 13:1–10). And since in Jesus’ day Israel consisted of only two and a half tribes, the Twelve were hardly chosen as representative of contemporary Israel. Thus, they have often been viewed as the ‘new Israel,’ the ‘new People of God’... This terminology, however, risks mistaking the ‘new People of God’ as a replacement for a rejected ‘old People of God’ and fails to do justice to the contemporary Jewish expectation of Jesus’ day. Israel’s hope, based on the prophets’ word, was for the restoration of Israel, *all* (twelve tribes) Israel (Sir 36:10; 48:10; Isa 49:6; Ezek 45:8; *Ps Sol* 17:26–32). Consequently, the appointing of Twelve offered a sign of the expected eschatological restoration of *all* God’s People” (158).

<sup>55</sup> McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 28.

<sup>56</sup> Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 481.

<sup>57</sup> Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, WBC 38B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 722.

While the body metaphors of 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 receive a lot of attention, they point to a higher degree of individualism within the church than the most common communal metaphor in the New Testament: the family. While an “eye is not an arm and so (obviously) cannot have the same function,” in a family, “the role distinctions blur: anyone can do the dishes or carry out the garbage.”<sup>59</sup>

Too often, however, “Western readers treat ‘brothers’ in Paul’s letters much as we would a punctuation mark.”<sup>60</sup> This is a massive exegetical mistake since “in ancient Mediterranean society the most intense emotional bonding did not occur between spouses in a marriage but between siblings who shared the same father.”<sup>61</sup> Hellerman explains,

The idea that we are brothers and sisters in Christ constitutes the fundamental conceptual point of departure for coming to grips with God’s social vision for His church. No image for the church occurs more often in the New Testament than the metaphor of family, and no image offers as much promise as ‘family’ for recapturing the relational integrity of first-century Christianity for our churches today.<sup>62</sup>

The “family metaphor” was “an invaluable” way for Paul to communicate the communal

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<sup>59</sup> Hal Miller, “Brothers, Sisters” in *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People* Ed., Charles E. Moore (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2016), 23.

<sup>60</sup> Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 78.

<sup>61</sup> Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 79. Hellerman continues, “As is now generally recognized by students of ancient family systems, the strongest ties of loyalty and affection in the New Testament world were ideally those shared among a group of brothers and sisters. The emotional bonding modern Westerners expect as a mark of a healthy husband-wife relationship was normally characteristic of sibling relationships” (38).

<sup>62</sup> Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 36.

reality of the church.<sup>63</sup>

Paul, however, is not the only New Testament author to emphasize the familial nature of the church community. In Mark 3:35, when Jesus is told that his biological family is waiting outside, he replies, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother”—thereby elevating the status of one’s spiritual family over one’s biological one. In another story, when Jesus asks a man to follow him and the man asks if he can bury his biological father, Jesus says, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Lk 9:60). N.T. Wright, in *Jesus and the Victory of God* explains Jesus’ startling response: “The only explanation for Jesus’ astonishing command is that he envisaged loyalty to himself and his kingdom-movement as creating an alternative family.”<sup>64</sup>

Because of this focus on community in the Scriptures, it is clear that the biblical witness runs contrary to the radical individualism of secular culture. Mulholland, in *Invitation to a Journey*, succinctly states, “we can no more be formed in the image of Christ outside of corporate spirituality than a coal can continue to burn bright outside a fire.”<sup>65</sup> And yet, this message is profoundly different than the secular culture of the

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<sup>63</sup> Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 78. Hellerman suggests that there are four major components of this type of family: “1. Affective Solidarity: the emotional bond that Paul experienced among brothers and sisters in God’s family. 2. Family Unity: the interpersonal harmony and absence of discord that Paul expected among brothers and sisters in God’s family. 3. Material Solidarity: the sharing of resources that Paul assumed would characterize relationships among brothers and sisters in God’s family. 4. Family Loyalty: the undivided commitment to God’s group that was to mark the value system of brothers and sisters in God’s family” (78-79).

<sup>64</sup> N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 401.

<sup>65</sup> M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2016), 170.

west—where expressive and radical individualism is so devoutly espoused. Quite clearly, the “value system” of secularism “has been shaped by a worldview that is diametrically opposed to the outlook of the early Christians and to the teachings of Scripture.”<sup>66</sup>

### **Biblical Community in the Age of Authenticity**

It is important, however, to realize that while radical individualism is undermined by the communal thrust of the Scriptures, the New Testament does make room for authentic expression within community. Scott McKnight, in *A Fellowship of Differents*, explains that God has “designed the church” to be a “fellowship of difference and differents.”<sup>67</sup> From the very beginning the church was meant to bring “unlikes and differents to the table to share life with one another as a new kind of family.”<sup>68</sup>

To highlight the relationship between authentic individual expression and communal life of the church, this section will explore three distinct New Testament texts from the letters of Paul. The first comes from the book of Ephesians. The second and third (which cover similar material) come from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and his letter to the Romans.

To start, in Ephesians 2:10, Paul explains that each human being is created by God, and that each human being has good works that God specifically designed her to do.

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<sup>66</sup> Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 16, Kindle. McKnight suggests that in any given house church in the first century you might find a number of families, possibly a couple of slaves, and dependent relatives. There might also be a couple homeless people, a few migrant workers and maybe even an enslaved prostitute a first century house church (15).

<sup>68</sup> McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents*, 16.

He writes, “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” To tease this out, given the current question about authenticity, it is important to focus on God’s creativity here.

The text says that “we are what he has made us.” God is the designer. Humans do not choose to be humans instead of cows (also made on day six). While this is obvious, it gets at the heart of authenticity. To be inauthentic is to run contrary to one’s design—how God has made a person. And Paul is clearly saying here that every human person is created by God not simply by means of human intercourse. Thus, and importantly, humans “not only benefit from” God’s creativity but are the “product of” it.<sup>69</sup> Hence, why Wright translates this part of Eph 2:10 as “God has made us what we are” (NTE).

The Greek word for workmanship (ποίημα) is where we get the English word “poem.” Thus, Wright adds,

We are, he says, God’s workmanship. This word sometimes has an artistic ring to it. It may be hinting that what God has done to us in King Jesus is a work of art, like a poem or sculpture. Or perhaps, granted what he goes on to say, we are like a musical score; and the music, which we now have to play, is the genuine way of being human, laid out before us in God’s gracious design, so that we can follow it.<sup>70</sup>

Like a work of art, each human being is uniquely made—with unique gifts and skills and ways of being in the world.

Moreover, the “stress in the Greek is on the first word in the clause, αὐτοῦ, ‘his.’ The force is that it is God, not the readers themselves, who has made them what they are

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<sup>69</sup> A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42A (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 114.

<sup>70</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 21–24.

as believers.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, “just as humans contributed nothing to their own creation so also they contributed nothing to their new creation; both are God’s work.”<sup>72</sup> This applies to God’s grace in forgiveness, his formation of them as new creations, and what they do with the new life they have been given.

Each human is God’s workmanship, but it is important to recognize that humans are not like the statue of David but rather created “for good works.” Lincoln explains that “ἐπί with the dative case should be taken as signifying purpose, goal, or result. So good works are not the source but the goal of the new relationship between humanity and God.”<sup>73</sup> Each human creature has unique works she is designed to do—a personal “destiny.”<sup>74</sup> Or said differently, “that God has a specific and unique purpose for each individual.”<sup>75</sup>

Here, Paul clarifies that the works are “prepared beforehand.” God created each human being to do good works which he envisioned before time began. The “relative clause, which concludes the verse, underlines both the importance and the divine origin of these good works.”<sup>76</sup> This means that “the whole of believers’ lives, including their practical ethical activity, is to be seen as part of God’s purpose.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 114.

<sup>72</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 114.

<sup>73</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 114.

<sup>74</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 114.

<sup>75</sup> Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 21–24.

<sup>76</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 115.

<sup>77</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 115.

Lastly, Paul finishes verse 10 with, “to be our way of life.” Or, in the words of N.T. Wright, “The road we must travel” (NTE).<sup>78</sup> God has created every human being uniquely with authentic good works in mind that she is invited to walk. And this sense of walking is key. Walking communicates responsibility—the “actual living out of God’s purpose in the world has to take place.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, Paul emphasizes that each human being has a unique and authentic personal journey or “road” she “must travel.” In this way, Paul is clearly not opposed to authentic expression, but assumes that it part of obedience.

In fact, in Ro 12 and 1 Cor 12, Paul illustrates how authentic expression fits with a communal understanding of the kingdom and life with Jesus. Paul writes, in Ro 12:4-8,

<sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. <sup>6</sup> We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; <sup>7</sup> ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; <sup>8</sup> the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Paul’s body analogy presumes that the church is “a single body (ἐν σῶμα)” which “has many constituent parts (μέλη)” that “do not have the same function (πρᾶξις).”<sup>80</sup> As a result, Paul presents the church as both unified and diverse. And this relationship (between the unity and diversity of the body) is critical. Diversity (authentic expression) is not simply tolerated. It is essential. James Dunn explains, “The body is *one* not despite its diversity, but is *one body* only by virtue of its diversity; without that diversity the body

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<sup>78</sup> Abbot, in contrast, writes, “A road exists objectively before one walks in it. A truer simile would be a path through the seas.” See T.K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians* (New York, NY: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 52–55.

<sup>79</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 115–116.

<sup>80</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 722.



would be a monstrosity.”<sup>81</sup> The authentic expression of individuals within the body is “necessary for the health and enrichment of the whole.”<sup>82</sup> Without this diversity, the body ceases to be what God has made it. In this way, Paul highlights the need for diverse authentic expression within the church.<sup>83</sup>

Paul, in 1 Corinthians, paints a similar picture. As in Romans 12, Paul here provides a kind of “dialectic of unity and diversity”<sup>84</sup> and “emphasizes the need and value of diversity within unity.”<sup>85</sup> To frame the discussion, Gordon Fee argues that Paul puts “the whole question in its ultimate theological context—diversity within unity belongs to the character of the eternal God.”<sup>86</sup> Just as God “is characterized by diversity within unity,” he “has decreed the same for the people who are to bear God’s likeness, the church.”<sup>87</sup> Anthony Thiselton agrees, “Paul’s emphasis upon unity-in-diversity is grounded in the nature of the one God, who is holy Trinity.”<sup>88</sup>

Contextually, this is important because the Corinthians are too focused on uniformity. Fee explains that it is “not uniformity (their model) but diversity in the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 724–725.

<sup>82</sup> John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1994), 326.

<sup>83</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 722.

<sup>84</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 197.

<sup>85</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 646.

<sup>86</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 646.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 646.

<sup>88</sup> Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 197.

context of unity (God's model)" that is "essential for a healthy church."<sup>89</sup> Accordingly, in v. 7, Paul teaches the Corinthians that diversity and unity work together "for the common good."<sup>90</sup> Diversity should (and will) benefit the whole just as the unity of a body benefits the whole.

At this point, though, it is important that we do not define and limit the diverse expressions to the short list of examples that Paul provides in 1 Cor 12:8-10. Fee explains that Paul's "list is neither carefully worked out nor exhaustive; it is merely representative of the Spirit's diverse ways of being present among them."<sup>91</sup> Paul is primarily concerned with the diverse ways that the Spirit works through each believer.

As Paul moves into verses 12-26 he explains that "even though the body is indeed one, it does not in fact consist of one member but of many, thus arguing for their need for diversity."<sup>92</sup> And it becomes clear that "there is no such things as true unity without the presupposition of diversity."<sup>93</sup> It is "essential."<sup>94</sup> As this relates to authenticity, it should be clear that diversity presupposes authenticity. And when we read verse 18, in light of Ephesians 2:10, we see that they are intimately connected.

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<sup>89</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 646.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 646.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 649. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 197. He writes, "the whole range of gifts can be found only in Christ or in the church as a whole." See Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 197.

<sup>92</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 666.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 668.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Hays, *First Corinthians: A Bible Commentary of Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press: 1997), 216.

Paul writes, “In fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.” Just as God designed each person “beforehand” (Eph 2:10), he has a vision of the church and the outworking of diversity within the unity of the body. Richard Hays adds, “The body is internally differentiated in accordance with the design of God.”<sup>95</sup>

God has designed each individual for good works that are meant to be expressed within the body. This assumes and presumes authentic expression—a believer expresses herself in accordance with how God has shaped and formed her within the church body that God has planted her. Any church that undermines God-directed and God-honoring authentic expression undermines the plan and work of God. Such God-directed and God-honoring authentic expression, of course, is only possible within a committed and discerning family of brothers and sisters. Hence, the New Testament’s focus on the expression of diversity within a unified church body.

### **The Church’s Call to Be a Faithful Presence in a Secular Age**

While the church is called to be community that is both unified and diverse, it is also called to be the faithful presence of God in a secular age. Just as authentic expression is not ultimately rooted in human creativity, the church’s faithful presence is not primarily grounded in human ingenuity but the presence of God.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>96</sup> Fitch believes that the “*missio Dei*” and the incarnation together “produce the witness of the church.” See David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), Kindle Edition, 200. See also Mark, Sayers, *Reappearing Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2019), Kindle Edition, 83.

This is evident in the Scriptures. Before God even forms humankind, the Spirit hovers over the chaos of pre-creation (Gen 1:2). And before day six (when humans are formed in God's image), "God first is present and active in the whole world."<sup>97</sup> God is before we are. His presence informs and shapes the church's faithful presence. This is true because God's work in the world is always primary, and it is true because God "chooses to become present in and through a people."<sup>98</sup>

In Genesis 1:27 God creates "humankind in his image." In the ancient world "an image was believed to carry the essence of that which it represented."<sup>99</sup> Thus, humankind is "a symbol of God's presence on earth"—the "very existence" of humankind "bears witness to the activity of God in the life of the world."<sup>100</sup>

Moreover, in Gen 1:28, God gives his image bearer "dominion" over all creation—much like "God's vice-regent on earth."<sup>101</sup> This does not mean that humans have free "license to exploit nature," but in the ancient world this was more like a commission for humankind to be God's faithful presence on earth.<sup>102</sup> God choose humans

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<sup>97</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 33.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>99</sup> John Walton, Victor Matthews, and Mark Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2000), 29. Moreover, Wenham explains that man is made "in the divine image," just as the tabernacle was made "in the pattern." This suggests that man is a copy of something that had the divine image, not necessarily a copy of God himself. See G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1987), 32.

<sup>100</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, PN: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 12.

<sup>101</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 31–32.

<sup>102</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 12. One's understanding of dominion needs, moreover, to be shaped by Jesus' teaching on what it means to live within his kingdom. Just as Jesus interprets kingly rule as service, one should interpret the power given to humanity in Gen 1:28 in light of his example.

to embody his presence and goodness in the world.

Astoundingly, while humans do not live up to this lofty calling, God continues to wait “patiently for an entry point to become present” in the “world through a people.”<sup>103</sup> In the biblical narrative this person is Abraham through whom God promises to bless “all the families of the world.”<sup>104</sup> Just as in Genesis 1, God identifies an “image bearer” to be his faithful presence in the world. Unfortunately, Abraham’s descendants do not become the blessing they were intended to be. Like Adam and Eve, they experience exile—not from the garden but instead from the promised land. Just as the original image bearers turn away from their vocation so does Israel. Each experiences exile and this failure shapes the subplot of the New Testament.

In the New Testament, God takes on human flesh that “the glory of God might be revealed to *all* flesh.”<sup>105</sup> It is important, though, to realize that this singularly important event in salvation history is not disconnected from the Old Testament but rather it’s “consummation and perfection.”<sup>106</sup> God, in the person of Jesus, continues to “become present to the world in and through a group of people,” and then he invites them to bear his image in the world as his faithful presence.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 204.

<sup>104</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 281. Wenham also notes, “The NT looks on the advent of Christ as ushering in the age in which all the nations will be blessed through Abraham (Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8)” (283).

<sup>105</sup> G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1999), 16.

<sup>106</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 16. For example, in John 1:14, the phrase “dwelt among us” can be translated “pitched his tent” (ἐσκήνωσεν, from σκηνή, “tent”) which “is evocative of the revelation of God’s glory in the Exodus—by the Red Sea, on Mount Sinai, and at the tent of meeting by Israel’s camp” (14). See Beasley-Murray, *John*, 16. See also Exod 33:7–11 and Exod 40:34–38.

<sup>107</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 26.

Accordingly, Jesus does not simply die in order to reconcile humanity to the Father, but he calls disciples and trains them to be his faithful presence. Jesus wasn't interested in the disciples only knowing what he knew; he wanted them to become like him. In the early chapters of Matthew and Luke, Jesus models what it looks like to live within the kingdom of God. Then in Mt 10 and Lk 9, he sends the disciples out to do the very things he has modeled. He tells them to proclaim that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” and to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons” (Mt 10:7-8)—all of which Jesus has done in Matthew 4-10. In community, Jesus forms apprentices and then sends them out to be his faithful presence.

He does this again and again. After sending the disciples out in Luke 9, they return and share stories about their experience. But Jesus is not finished training them. He models more, and then sends out the seventy two for more practice (in Luke 10)—so that by the end of the Gospels, Jesus can commission them to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19).<sup>108</sup> Jesus sends out the disciples to be his faithful presence and bear his image that the world might come to know God through them.

It is important to note, though, that while Jesus sends the disciples, he does not send the disciples alone. He promises to go with them. He anticipates that they will forget his presence among them, and therefore he says “remember” that “I am with you always” (Mt 28:20). This connection between sending and presence is reinforced in John 20:21-22. Here, Jesus tells the disciples that just “as the Father has sent” him so he is “sending”

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<sup>108</sup> Some of this section is adapted from Tony Traback, “*10x10 Mentoring Independent Study*,” (Independent Study with Terry Walling, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2017).

them and, as he does this, he breathes the Spirit on them. Here, Jesus “extends his own presence by giving of the Holy Spirit to his people, and subsequently sends them into the world.”<sup>109</sup> Thus, as so often happens in the biblical narrative, God “becomes visibly present through a people who make his presence known.”<sup>110</sup>

The point is not for the world to look at the church and say, “Look what the church is going” but rather see the church at work and wonder, “What is God doing in and through those people?” The church is designed to be a witness of God’s faithful presence in the world, and that witness takes place at the “intersection of God’s cosmic reign and God’s particular presence in Christ in a specific people, a specific place, and a specific time.”<sup>111</sup> This begins in Jerusalem and extends to the ends of the earth through the people that God calls to himself and sends into the world: the church.

“God’s plan,” from the very beginning, was to fill “the world with His presence.”<sup>112</sup> And from the very beginning, God has selected a people to reveal himself and through whom to work. He has adopted a people to be his faithful presence. That people is the church. But as the church considers what this looks like within a secular age both challenges and opportunities emerge.

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<sup>109</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 23.

<sup>110</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 300. One might wonder why God requires witnesses if he is always present. Fitch explains, “God’s presence is not always obvious” and therefore, “he requires witnesses” (286).

<sup>111</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 201-202. Fitch explains, “When God’s people become present to God’s presence in the world (*missio Dei*) by making space for Christ’s presence to be among them (incarnation), witness happens. In mathematical terms we might put it this way: *missio Dei* + incarnation = witness. This is faithful presence” (201-202).

<sup>112</sup> Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 96.

## The Challenges and Opportunities in a Secular Age

The church is called to be God's faithful presence in the world. Yet, when one looks at both the Bible and history, the contextual applications of this calling vary. This, of course, raises the question of what it looks like for the church to be God's faithful presence in a secular age. For example, how can the church be God's faithful witness when pluralism makes all belief more fragile?<sup>113</sup> Moreover, what does it look like for the church to be a clear and effective witness for and of Jesus in a culture saturated with visions of the good life?<sup>114</sup>

To address these questions, it is important to remember, at the outset, that the "nova effect" does not only affect the church.<sup>115</sup> It is not like the church is the only community or entity affected by secularism. Culturally there is a broad "sense of malaise, emptiness, a need for meaning"—a longing for something more in the secular West.<sup>116</sup> Thus, the church's witness takes place within a cross-pressured culture—where people are longing for fullness and meaning.<sup>117</sup>

James K.A. Smith explains, "Almost as soon as unbelief becomes an option, unbelievers begin to have doubts — which is to say, they begin to wonder if there isn't something 'more.'"<sup>118</sup> Even in the writings of secular writers like David Foster Wallace

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<sup>113</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University; 2007), 304.

<sup>114</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 302.

<sup>115</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 303.

<sup>116</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 302.

<sup>117</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 308, 600.

<sup>118</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 61.



and poets like Mary Oliver one can feel this longing for “more” quite viscerally.<sup>119</sup>

Hence, while the various visions of the good life undermine belief, they also create an opportunity for Christian witness.

Moreover, according to the biblical witness, when God’s people are at their most vulnerable, God is often most present. Mark Sayers writes, “Since the fall, God has been in the renewal business.”<sup>120</sup> This is both apparent in the Bible and history. Biblically the examples are numerous.

For instance, the defining feature of the book of Judges is a cycle of “decline and revival.”<sup>121</sup> Joshua leads the people of Israel into the promised land. Everyone is excited. But within one generation the people fall away. And it was here in their “great distress” that God raised “up judges, who saved them” (Jdgs 2:15-16). This, however, is not a one-time event in the book of judges. The cycle of decline and renewal repeats throughout the book (Jdgs 2:15-19).

This pattern continues into the book of Kings and the book of Chronicles. For example, Amon and his father Manasseh do “evil in the eyes of the LORD” worshipping other gods (2 Chron 33:22-24). And yet, after Israel’s unfaithfulness under Amon, God

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<sup>119</sup> James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), Kindle Edition, 63. Mark Sayers believes that “Post-Christianity is experiencing a crisis of doubt over the prospects of its own program of revival.” See Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 28. It is “dependent on crucial political, economic, and social factors being in place, elements that are becoming fragile, opening a new potential for renewal and revival in the West.” See Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 32.

<sup>119</sup> Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 33

<sup>120</sup> Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 33.

<sup>121</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 58.

anoints Josiah king which leads to renewal. Josiah finds the Scriptures, leads the people into repentance, and a renewed covenant with God (2 Kgs 22 and 23).

This same pattern happens in history as well as the Bible. The Industrial Revolution “brought profound social changes” that affected the church.<sup>122</sup> People moved into big cities to work in factories, “which took them away from their parish churches and towns where everyone knew everyone else and where norms of behavior and participation in institutions could be enforced through social pressure.”<sup>123</sup> In addition, “market capitalism gave individuals (who could now act more autonomously) more good and services to choose from.”<sup>124</sup> This profoundly destabilized church life.

But it was during this same period of change and church struggle that “the revivalist ministries of the Wesley’s in England and George Whitfield in America” arose in response to “these cultural realities. They took preaching directly to the masses in outdoor meetings that called people to conversation.”<sup>125</sup> The “revivalists emphasized the decisions of individuals rather than the incorporation of families into a community and called on a dramatic turning experience, rather than process a liturgy and catechism, for spiritual formation.”<sup>126</sup> This led to a massive Jesus movement when people felt most concerned about the church.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 56.

What is clear from these examples (both biblical and historical) is that our historical situation is less unique than we might imagine. Martin Lloyd Jones, in his book *Revival*, writes “Before the evangelical awakening of two hundred years ago the churches were as empty as they are today, perhaps even more so.”<sup>127</sup> Thus, while our context is unique, it is only unique in the same way that every age has its own texture and nuance. Currently, in our secular western culture, “the important institutions of our public life do not all point to a unified set of beliefs about life and reality” and “no one inherits their belief systems as they once did.”<sup>128</sup> Instead, “people actively choose among competing sets of beliefs and worldviews and must be persuaded through personal appeals to do so.”<sup>129</sup> These are key challenges that face the church in a secular age. And while many of these contextual nuances are unique, the struggle to “reach” a new generation and context is not.

Accordingly, Martin Lloyd-Jones believes that “the problem confronting the Church today is not the new circumstances in which we find ourselves.”<sup>130</sup> Historically, “the story of the Church has not been a straight line, a level record of achievement. The history of the Church has been a history of ups and downs.”<sup>131</sup> Studying periods of renewal and revival, Jones explains that “periods of revival and re-awakening have often

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<sup>127</sup> Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Revival* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1987), 29.

<sup>128</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 58.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>130</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Revival*, 29.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

followed periods of great drought.”<sup>132</sup> It is important, therefore, that we realize that the church will not die in the secular west. God will show up—and importantly, the secular search for meaning, the rise of anxiety, and loneliness might even create a context in which God is sought in new and fresh ways.

This expectation is important. But it comes with a caveat. Renewal is not something that the church can control. In a technology (and technique-driven) culture, Christians too often think that they can control renewal. But “when it comes to renewal, God leads the dance. He controls the significant elements of renewal—the pouring out of His Spirit and presence with power and force, the wholesale transformation of communities, cities, and nations.”<sup>133</sup> While we can certainly “prepare for the dance, making ourselves ready to be led,” we are ultimately powerless to force renewal.<sup>134</sup> Even if we do all the “right things,” “there is no guarantee that” God will initiate a “large-scale revival.”<sup>135</sup> There is no guarantee that “we will see spectacular growth.”<sup>136</sup>

When the church focuses solely on its techniques, this reinforces immanent frame assumptions about how change happens—that human creativity and ingenuity are the primary drivers of change in the world, not the power and presence of God. But this does not mean that the church cannot “prepare for the dance.”

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., *Revival*, 27.

<sup>133</sup> Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 36.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 37.

Mark 9:14-29 is both illustrative and prescriptive. While Jesus is on a nearby mountain, the disciples encounter a boy who needs healing. They do everything in their power to heal him, but despite their best efforts, they are unsuccessful. Later in the chapter, the disciples ask Jesus why their best attempts were futile, and he tells them that the boy's healing required "prayer" (Mark 9:29)—which presumes that the disciples were trying to heal the boy in their own power. Lloyd-Jones writes, "The modern church is like the disciples trying their best but unable to do what is needed."<sup>137</sup> This parallels the church's efforts in the secular West, as it tries to manufacture and generate techniques that will shift the culture, when in fact, the church is "confronted by something that is too deep" for technique "to get rid of, or to deal with" and it needs "something that can go down beneath that evil power, and shatter it, and there is only one thing that can do that, and that is the power of God."<sup>138</sup>

The church does not need better marketing or performances. It needs rhythms of alignment that bring it into the stream of God's presence. This likely begins with an examination of "our life and our kingdom walk through the King's standards and repenting of the ways that we have fallen short" that we might "walk in step with His voice."<sup>139</sup> This starting place is powerfully captured in 2 Chronicles 7:14—"if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

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<sup>137</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Revival*, 9.

<sup>138</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Revival*, 19.

<sup>139</sup> Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 41-42.

The church cannot witness to God's presence if it is simply doing its own thing. Alan Noble, in *Disruptive Witness*, writes, "Bearing a disruptive witness involves adopting a new movement, a shift in ends from ourselves to a transcendent God, and then letting that shift shape us in every aspect of our lives."<sup>140</sup> The church cannot expect to be a witness of God if it is not tuned into God's activity in the world—allowing it to affect and shape its life.<sup>141</sup>

And it is from this place of humility and repentance that the church needs to embrace new habits and disciplines that align us with God and his work in the world. Nobel explains, "We need to cultivate habits of contemplation and presence that help us accept the wonder and grandeur of existence and examine our assumptions about meaning and transcendence."<sup>142</sup> And the "result of these habits should be a deeper sense that we live in a created world sustained by a loving God, and an openness to the way creation and revelation pierce our buffered selves and interpret it."<sup>143</sup> Such rhythms, disrupt and challenge "the secular assumption of a closed, materialist universe."<sup>144</sup> This, not

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<sup>140</sup> Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 90.

<sup>141</sup> Mark Sayers explains in more detail: "At the heart of this process is God's desire to renew us and our life systems, to use His presence to align us with His purposes, and to release us into our God-given mandate for which He created us. The renewal pattern is composed of four stages through which we progress: Holy Discontent, which leads into Preparation, which then sets us up for the posture of Contending, which then moves into the formation of Patterns that center our lives around God's presence. A group of people gathered around this process then finds each other, forming a Remnant. The process looks like this, moving in a clockwise direction." See Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, 39-40.

<sup>142</sup> Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 88.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

technique, is the key to the church's witness, and its ability to be a faithful presence of God in the secular West.

## PART 3

### MANUAL DESIGN



## CHAPTER 4

### THE PURPOSE AND DESIGN

The purpose of this manual is to train and equip the adults at Wellspring church to connect with God and one another as well as be a faithful presence in Pacific Grove, California. It incorporates the contextual awareness of chapter one, the literature reviews in chapter two, and the biblical theology of chapter three to accomplish this purpose.

This goal of this chapter is to summarize the design of the training manual. First, it will cover the manual's desired theological and learning outcomes. Second, it will summarize the manual's components and pedagogy. Third, it will outline the target population and facilitators who will be hosting the trainings.

#### **Theological Implications**

The manual is designed to have three essential theological outcomes. First, it attempts to break down the assumptions of the immanent frame—primarily that God is distant and inaccessible. A core challenge of secularism is that its “social imaginary” “gives little heed to transcendence or divine action” and “looks sideways and skeptically at any definition or articulation of human experience that draws on anything other than

the immanent.”<sup>1</sup> Because of this, the manual is designed to create the possibility of God-encounter—since “the only way for us to know God” is to “encounter God’s historical arrival.”<sup>2</sup>

Second, the manual is focused on undermining the forces within secularism that drive individuals apart. The buffered self in the age of authenticity locates meaning within the individual, which disconnects meaning from community.<sup>3</sup> While God-encounter can be an individual experience, community is an essential ingredient in biblical faith. The manual, therefore, is designed to foster interpersonal connections within Wellspring Church—to reconnect community and the spiritual life.<sup>4</sup> The goal is not to undermine authentic expression but re-ground it within a communal experience.

Third, the manual is designed to help participants carry their experiences of God, both personally and communally, into the world as the faithful presence of God amidst the belief fragilization of secularism. The manual’s goal is not to eliminate doubt but to help participants honestly share their faith while still experiencing the “cross-pressures” of pluralism.<sup>5</sup> The manual assumes that people “never move to a point beyond all

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Volume 1 (Ministry in a Secular Age): Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 103, 110, Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age (Ministry in a Secular Age Book #2)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 183-184, Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Alastair Roberts, “Liturgical Piety” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* Ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 66, Kindle.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 2007), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 555.

anticipation, beyond all hunches, to the kind of certainty we can enjoy.”<sup>6</sup> Instead it encourages belief “while doubting”—a willingness for participants to add their witness into the diverse versions of fullness in the world.

### **Learning Outcomes**

In addition to the theological implications, there are two major learning outcomes for the training manual. First, the majority of the chapters will focus on equipping Wellspring adults to navigate the background assumptions of secularism by practically guiding them into practices that foster dependence upon God, connection with one another, and send them out to be a faithful presence in their families, neighborhoods, and workplaces.

The training manual is designed to foster “enchanted” second-nature responses in adults at Wellspring. Aristotle argues that “when you’ve acquired a moral habit, it becomes second nature.”<sup>7</sup> The same is true for learning to live in a re-enchanted world. “First nature” systems, like breathing, happen automatically. Human bodies “simply take care of a process that hums along under the hood of consciousness. Those habits that become ‘second’ nature operate in the same way: they become so woven into who you are that they are as natural for you as breathing and blinking.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 551.

<sup>7</sup> James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 17, Kindle Edition.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 17

But learning to live in an enchanted world takes practice. Cultivating a bent towards enchantment “is more like practicing scales on the piano than learning music theory: the goal is, in a sense, for your fingers to learn the scales so they can then play ‘naturally,’ as it were.”<sup>9</sup> It is not “just information acquisition; it’s more like inscribing something into the very fiber of your being.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, developing this kind of awareness and perception is “learned and acquired, through imitation and practice.”<sup>11</sup> Our ability to make space for God, each other and be a faithful presence is “trained in the same way our biological muscles are trained when we practice a golf swing or piano scales.”<sup>12</sup>

Seen in this way, discipleship “is a way to curate” the “heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what” one loves.<sup>13</sup> Thus, rather than simply learning information that one can repeat back, the manual creates experiments that are designed to shape the “the longings and desires that orient” one “toward some version of the good life.”<sup>14</sup> It is a mistake to assume that “ultimate loves, longings, desires, and cravings” are not learned.<sup>15</sup> The “orientation of the heart happens from the bottom up, through the formation of our

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 20

habits of desire.”<sup>16</sup> Or more simply, “learning to love (God) takes practice.”<sup>17</sup> And this is what the manual is designed to do.

Second, the manual is designed to help participants identify the obstacles to belief they face within secularism. This involves both directly teaching about secularism and its background assumptions as well as identifying the “secular habits” that shape and form participant’s daily lives in “unconscious ways.”<sup>18</sup> Smith, in *You Are What You Love*, entitles these “unconscious” habits “cultural liturgies” and argues that they are “not just one-off events” that people “unwittingly do,” but “more significantly, they are formative practices that do something to you, unconsciously but effectively tuning your heart to the songs of Babylon rather than the songs of Zion.”<sup>19</sup> Too often, Smith believes, people are “training and aiming and directing” their “loves” without any “awareness” because they do not “recognize what’s at stake in” their “cultural immersion.”<sup>20</sup>

One of the manual’s goal is to help participants appreciate how the social imaginary of secularism is baked into “everyday rituals and practices.”<sup>21</sup> While it is true that the social imaginary profoundly effects the imagination, Charles Taylor makes the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 45.

case that the imagination is “‘carried’ in practices.”<sup>22</sup> Smith explains that this way of seeing the world “is not something that is transferred and absorbed by trading propositions; it is a disposition and attunement to the world that seep into our imagination through the practices that ‘carry’ it.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the manual does not simply suggest practices to foster God-encounter, but also provides practices that open one’s eyes to the secular practices which shape one’s imagination.

### **Components and Pedagogy**

The manual is divided into five major parts. Part one provides the introductory framework and identifies the obstacles to encountering God in a secular context. Part two focuses on connection with God. Here, each chapter will highlight a specific topic (story, space, food etc.) and provide concrete practices for experimentation. Part three is about connection with one another. Moreover, just as in part two, each chapter will highlight a specific topic and provide concrete practices for experimentation. Part four focuses on being a faithful presence. It will also be composed of chapters that highlight specific topics and provide concrete practices for experimentation. The fifth and final part is designed to help the class or community devise a future plan, based on the previous week’s reading, experimentation, and discussion. At the end of the manual, in the appendix, there are also questions for reflection (connected to each chapter) and facilitator guidance—on how to structure and lead a gathering.

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<sup>22</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 30, Kindle Edition.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 30.

Throughout, the manual uses one contextual analogy. Since Pacific Grove is located on Monterey Bay and the Pacific Ocean, the manual explains that encountering God is like seeing whales. Just as one's proximity to water increases one's chance of seeing whales, so one's chances of encountering God increase by adopting certain practices (which are called "shoreline practices")—that create the opportunity for encountering God's presence. The manual is designed to help Wellspring adults discover "shoreline practices" to help them draw closer to God, closer to one another (as they draw closer to God), and invite others (outside the church) into God's presence.

The goal of this analogy is to use a "real thing" in the learning process. A "*real thing*" is three-dimensional and naturally has all the characteristics of size, color, texture, weight, structure, flexibility, etc."<sup>24</sup> It is like the difference between talking about the ocean and being able to stand before it or even walk into it. Pictures are "*illusions* of the real thing."<sup>25</sup> Words are "merely *symbols* that have been designated as representations of objects or ideas."<sup>26</sup> They "are the most abstract form in which a message can be presented to learners."<sup>27</sup> This is why, living by the ocean, the ocean will be the dominate contextual analogy of the manual.

Moreover, given that learning dramatically increases with saying and doing, the manual will not be read alone, but gone through in a communal learning environment,

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<sup>24</sup> Patricia Cranton and Cynthia B. Weston, "Developing the Instructional Strategy," in *Planning Instruction for Adult Learners* (Toronto: Wall & Emerson, 1989), 92.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>26</sup> Cranton and Weston, "Developing the Instructional Strategy," 93.

<sup>27</sup> Cranton and Weston, "Developing the Instructional Strategy," 93.

focused on dialogue and experiential learning. Studies have repeatedly shown that adults learn better in dialogue; they “have enough life experience to be in dialogue with any teacher about any subject and will learn new knowledge, attitudes, or skills best in relation to that life experience.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, the stories told in the midst of dialogue are powerful. They are not simply a way to share one’s experience with others. They profoundly shape one’s perceived reality and expectation. They impact what one believes is possible, what one can imagine, and because of this, they help us to “make sense of our world and our experience.”<sup>29</sup>

This is true for modern people and it was also true for the Apostle Paul. For Paul, stories were not only the means by which he shared the gospel, but also the means by which people embraced the possibility of Jesus as God. Paul knew that if people were going to encounter the living God and enjoy his presence, the story in which they lived was not inconsequential but key.<sup>30</sup> Seen in this way, storytelling becomes an essential way that the group dialogue process in itself creates thirst for God.

Moreover, dialogue and stories also affect us emotionally, and emotions are intimately connected to motivation. In part, this is true because a story “makes sense of a life, a series of events, or an experience by a ‘logic’ that is not deductive but affective.”<sup>31</sup> There seems to be “a kind of ‘fit’ or proportionality between narrative and our affective

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<sup>28</sup> Jane Kathryn Vella, “Twelve Principles for Effective Adult Learning,” *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 66.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 66-70.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 65.



register.”<sup>32</sup> Because they impact “the core of our identity” through “our wants and longings and desires,” they also profoundly impact our “actions and behavior.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, stories not only shape our imagination (how we see the world) but what we feel about it and what we want in it.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, dialogue makes it possible for individuals to connect with one another—to get to know one another and hopefully, break down the manifold separations resulting from the buffered self in the age of authenticity. Andrew Root writes, “Stories are the tentacles of personhood that reach out to share and be shared in.”<sup>35</sup> It is through stories and dialogue that we enter into another person’s life and experience. It is not “through magical voodoo but through the words of our stories” that we draw closer to “one to another.”<sup>36</sup> Community is not formed simply by reading a manual alone but dialoguing about the process together.

Dialogue and stories are key. But they are only part of the learning process. Experimentation between classes will also be emphasized so that participants return to class with stories to tell.<sup>37</sup> Rather than simply passing along information, the manual is

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Much of this paragraph is adapted from Tony Traback, “The Shoreline, Whales and God’s Presence,” (Independent Study with Richard Beck, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA., 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 143.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>37</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, Rosemary S. Caffarella, and Lisa M. Baumgartner, “Embodied, Spiritual, and Narrative Learning,” in *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 208.

designed to create learning experiences in which the participants “learn *in* an experience.”<sup>38</sup> Norma Cook Everist, explains, “We remember 10 percent of what we read, 20 percent of what we hear, 30 percent of what we see, 50 percent of what we hear and see, 70 percent of what we say ourselves and 90 percent of what we say and do.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, to fully learn, one must not only dialogue but also experiment.

This focus on experimentation is not only pragmatically justified but also theologically necessary. Jesus is “not Lecturer-in-Chief; his school of charity is not like a lecture hall where we passively take notes while Jesus spouts facts about himself in a litany of text-heavy PowerPoint slides.”<sup>40</sup> This kind of “intellectualist model of the human person—one that reduces us to mere intellect—assumes that learning (and hence discipleship) is primarily a matter of depositing ideas and beliefs into mind-containers.”<sup>41</sup> It is called a “banking model of education” in which we “treat human learners as if they are safe-deposit boxes for knowledge and ideas, mere intellectual receptacles for beliefs.”<sup>42</sup> But this approach ignores the “power of habit”—as “if our behavior were basically the conclusion to a little syllogism in our head whereby we think our way through the world.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, “Embodied, Spiritual, and Narrative Learning,” 192.

<sup>39</sup> Everist, “Eight Facets of Learning,” 111.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 3.

Research clearly illustrates that this model of the human person is not accurate. To achieve “the highest levels of the cognitive and affective domains” the “learner must be actively involved in situations in which they are used.”<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, the manual is designed for participants to “use” the information in their lives.

Thus, between gatherings participants will attempt experiments in the everyday contours of their lives, and then return to the group to share with, ask questions of, and wonder with one another. In this way, the manual and the gathering are designed to create an engaged, lab-like, learning environment that helps adults at Wellspring encounter to God, connect with one another, and be a faithful presence of God’s kingdom in a disenchanted secular age.<sup>45</sup>

### **Target Population and Teacher**

The target population for the training and the manual are the adults at Wellspring Church in Pacific Grove, California. And as the pastor of Wellspring Church and the author of the manual, I will be the principle presenter and facilitator. With that said, as the manual and training are implemented in other gatherings, others will facilitate those gatherings. To make sure that they are equipped for the task, I will train the facilitators so that they are able to effectively lead groups through the manual.

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<sup>44</sup> Cranton and Weston, “Developing the Instructional Strategy,” 115.

<sup>45</sup> Everist, “Eight Facets of Learning,” 125.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLEMENTATION, ASSESSMENT, AND EVALUATION

This chapter will focus on the implementation, assessment, and evaluation of the training manual. First, it will explain the implementation process at Wellspring Church in Pacific Grove, California. Second, it will detail the evaluation process of the manual and the evaluation process of the training as a whole. Third, it will cover the primary metrics for success that will shape the manual's evaluation.

#### **Implementation**

The manual will be implemented at Wellspring Church in Pacific Grove, California. Specifically, it will be implemented into two different areas of adult ministry and church life. First, it will be implemented in Wellspring's Well Communities (or small groups). The manual is ideally suited for study in an on-going community. Since these groups meet for most of the year (September-May), they provide a perfect context for on-going sharing, experimentation, and communal accountability.

Second, the manual will be implemented into Wellspring's class structure. Wellspring's classes are designed to be places of learning and dialogue, and therefore are also well-suited for the manual's implementation. Because classes usually last a

maximum of twelve weeks, the manual would likely be divided into two classes. Part one would be offered in the fall, and part two would be offered in the winter.

Lastly, if the manual and training are effective at Wellspring, then the manual will be implemented in other local church settings. This, however, is not the primary goal. The primary goal of the manual is to help adults at Wellspring draw closer to God, connect with one another, and be a faithful presence of God and his kingdom in the world.

### **Pre-Implementation Assessment**

The assessment process will take place in multiple phases. The first phase was conducted in August 2020. A total of twelve Wellspring leaders, volunteers, and staff reviewed the manual. They were told about the process of implementation and the desired outcomes. They were given three weeks to read, consider, and offer feedback (see appendix B for the assessment form). The goal of this pre-implementation assessment was to gather relevant input to improve the content, flow, and contextual awareness of the manual.

Their feedback was both positive and constructive. First, the feedback suggests that the shoreline and the whale analogy are contextually relevant. One reviewer wrote, “I appreciated the whale/shoreline concept for talking about spiritual disciplines. What a great image! It reduces the pressure to create something, but helps the reader make space for God to show up.” Others wrote, “I love the whale thread throughout the material” and “the whale watching analogy was great.” Another reviewer commented, “Most days I walk to the shoreline and so this analogy totally matched my experience.” She continued,

“The general message of needing to attend to God (i.e., go the shoreline) was helpful and relevant.”

Second, their feedback suggests that the topics covered in the manual are both applicable and beneficial. Reviewers were asked what topics they liked most, and interestingly, their answers were very diverse. Every topic was someone’s favorite. Some reviewers were especially helped by the introductory framework. Others appreciated the sections on faithful presence. Another reviewer really appreciated the community section. He wrote,

My favorite part of the content was the community section. It seems often (whether in books, programs, etc.) that when discussing practices for encountering God, they are solitary. This may just be because I am an extrovert, but many of the moments in my life when I have experienced the presence of God most richly, I have been in community with others.

I was surprised by how many reviewers really connected with the story content. For instance, one reviewer wrote,

I thought the section which discussed the connection between stories and our expectation of seeing God and experiencing his presence was good. I have always really enjoyed hearing and telling stories and it was comforting to think about how that is a practice for experiencing God. I guess it sounds obvious now that I have read it, but I don’t think I have thought of stories in that way before.

The one section that seemed least relevant to multiple reviewers was the section on messengers. In part, I think this was due to the fact that people do not often think about angels and demons. One reviewer wrote, “I honestly think all these topics are important and applicable to my life. If I had to pick one that was *least* applicable to my life, it would have to be Messengers. This isn’t because of anything you wrote about it, rather because I’m a product of the disenchanted culture that you and Taylor are describing in the beginning.” Even the people who really appreciated this section liked it because it is

not something they often think about. For instance, one reviewer wrote, “My favorite section was on messengers because it is an area, I have never given much thought to.” Similarly, another wrote, “Reading the messengers section I thought to myself ‘wow this is different’ and it makes sense and yet it feels unusual for me. This section takes me to a place I don’t think about often, but I understand why you show that we should. This is more unique to me.”

Third, the reviewers appreciated the focus on experiments and practices. None of the reviewers pushed back on the idea of experimentation as a key part of formation. All of them appreciated the experiments and believe that they would be helpful for Wellspring adults, especially within the context of community. While reviewers appreciated different practices, I was struck by how many people were impacted by the re-storying experiment. One reviewer wrote,

I think the experiments in the story section were most helpful. Especially when you explained the idea of re-storying our desires for comforts (like food, Netflix, etc.) as a desire for God. I think this change in perspective can really open up opportunities for people who would otherwise dismiss and disregard their emotions. I hear (mostly guys) all the time say, ‘Yeah I’m really good at compartmentalizing my emotions...’ Which generally means they just reach for other comforts instead of confronting their anxieties, sadness, loneliness, etc. When people allow God to comfort them instead of the fleeting band aids, they experience true intimacy and healing from him.

Another reviewer wrote, “I loved the way re-storying my search for God addressed my attempts to find the presence of God without shaming me for my less honorable habits.”

Based on this feedback, I will likely spend more time on the story section in general since it is so intimately connected to motivation, thirst, and emotion.

Fourth, while people really appreciated the introductory section on how we see the world, ourselves, and experience life, multiple people asked how I might be able to continue those themes throughout the manual. One reviewer wrote,

The first section really lays it out well and brings up many of the issues we all face in our daily lives as it relates to deepening our relationship with God. But I'd love to get more of that reflection on our secular context sprinkled throughout the whole manual. I just don't think we fully realize how much our current culture impacts our faith and continuing to intertwine those challenges more would strengthen the discussions as a group.

Another reviewer asked, "Are there ways to connect 'how we see... (ourselves, the world, experience life)' throughout the practices sections? Just to remind us how they link back to the context? I think the whale analogy helps some with this connection."

Given this feedback, I will make sure that the discussion regularly returns to these introductory assumptions within secular culture and how they affect formation. My hope is that each group will organically wrestle with the assumptions of secular culture as it engages with the questions and experiments. But if this does not happen organically, as the leader, I will re-introduce the assumptions of secularism to help the group process the questions and experiments within the larger cultural context. This is essential because how we see the world, ourselves, and experience life profoundly shapes how we see God and what we assume about him.

### **Additional Assessments**

The second phase of the assessment process will take place during implementation. The assessment will begin with a pre-training on-line survey (via survey



monkey). The goal of the pre-training survey is to discern “themes.”<sup>1</sup> For adult learners, “motivation is magically enhanced” when the content is aligned with their own “themes.”<sup>2</sup> While it is clearly not possible to tailor the entire manual to the particular hopes of each participant, it is possible to make minor adjustments to the group’s specific themes. It is also possible for the group facilitator to refer to the specific themes of individuals as the training unfolds.

The third phase of the assessment process will take place during the training itself. Each time that a Well Community or a class gathers, the facilitator will ask the group for feedback about content, process, and areas of adjustment. This will provide on-going feedback so that each group can make micro (and macro) adjustments in order to make the content more appropriate and helpful within each gathering. In addition, as both Well Communities and classes finish each of the manual’s three major sections, there will be a short informal survey to help monitor progress and make adjustments. In the Well Communities and classes, the first informal survey will take place after the section on God-dependence (at the end of the fall). The second informal survey will take place after the community section (at the end of winter). The final section, on faithful presence, will not have a specific survey because it will be enfolded into the fourth assessment phase.

The fourth assessment phase will take place when the training and the manual are complete. At this time, when all of the content is covered, a longer survey will be given to review the completed experience. This survey will be distributed to both participants

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Kathryn Vella, “Twelve Principles for Effective Adult Learning,” *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Vella, “Twelve Principles for Effective Adult Learning,” 6.

and facilitators. As the author of the manual and the lead pastor at Wellspring, I will also meet with each of the leaders for an in-person interview to garner additional insights about the process.

The fifth and final phrase of the assessment will be thirty days after the manual and training have been completed. This will help us to determine the lasting effectiveness of the training. Because, in the end, the goal of the training is not simply to help Wellspring adults go deeper with God, connect more fully with one another, and lean into being a faithful presence during the training, but to become the kind of people who do these things once the training is complete.

### **Evaluation of the Training and the Manual**

The manual is designed to help adults at Wellspring church draw closer to God, connect with one another, and be a faithful presence of God in the secular context. As a result, it is primarily focused on overcoming four major barriers within secularism. First, it is focused on overcoming the assumptions of the immanent frame, which make God-encounter feel impossible by helping people to draw nearer to God. Second, it is designed to help individuals shaped by the secular understanding of the buffered self in an age of authenticity to connect with one another, and as a result, form deeper relational connections within a spiritual community. Third, it is designed to equip the adults at Wellspring to be a faithful presence of God in the midst of the cross-pressures of the secular West. Fourth, it is designed to help Wellspring adults identify the various components of secularism so that habit formation becomes more intentional.

Accordingly, the four primary measurements for success are intimately linked with God-dependence, community-connection, missional willingness, and cultivating awareness about secular habit formation. First, we will evaluate whether participants believe that they are closer to God at the end of the training, or whether their connection to God has remained the same or even deteriorated. While this is a subjective measurement, it is important for participants to self-assess their own experience of God. Perceived change is intimately connected to motivation.

With that said, it is also important to have a more objective measure, and therefore, we will also evaluate habit formation—whether participant behavior has changed and how much. For example, have they adopted new practices that draw them into God’s presence? Or have they simply returned to their old pre-training habits and rhythms? Moreover, we will measure how regularly they practice these new habits to better understand their application.

Second, we will have the participants evaluate whether they are more (or less) connected to others at the end of the training. Did the dialogue and communal experimentation provide enough relational glue for new relationships to endure thirty days after the training, or was the relational connection insufficient to last after the training ended? Again, while this is a subjective measurement, participant perception is pivotal to on-going change. If the dialogue in the gatherings and the practices in the manual do not lead to a greater sense of perceived connection, then this must be recognized and considered. This subjective evaluation tool, however, will also be paired with a more objective measure of habit formation. Specifically, did participants sustain

new communal practices thirty days after the training or did they drift back to former individualistic habits?

Third, we will ask participants to evaluate whether they are living more fully as God's faithful presence. Did the training actually help participants to navigate the cross-pressures and fragilization of secularism? Or, did they find the habits and practices insufficient to overcome the obstacles and doubts they faced? Moreover, we will also measure whether participants were able to embody new habits thirty days after the training as well as how often they were able to "use" them.

Lastly, we will evaluate whether participants have identified any "secular habits" that influence their formation.<sup>3</sup> The hope is that these previously unconscious habits have moved into conscious awareness, and participants are more able to recognize the habits that shape their lives. For instance, do individuals begin to see their phone, social media, and Netflix habits as formative habits which can compete with their spiritual formation?

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<sup>3</sup> James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 29, Kindle Edition.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

For the past three years, since arriving at Wellspring Church in the summer of 2017, I have witnessed the effects of secularism on adult spiritual formation. And I have come to accept that unless we face the “conditions of belief” in which we are formed as a body, we will not be able to thrive or flourish. We cannot hide in some private sacred space and assume that if we retreat, we will avoid secular formation. Instead, we will settle for “purely immanent goals” and lose touch with the “transcendent.”<sup>1</sup> We will be shaped into a people who do not expect God be with us as we go about our day. We will settle for authentic expression and self-fulfillment disconnected from deep relationships—without realizing that authentic life and personal flourishing cannot be achieved without rootedness in community. Alone, disconnected from God and each other, all we will have is our doubts—doubts that might be unavoidable but certainly are more burdensome when carried alone.<sup>2</sup> And these doubts will become so corrosive that they will undermine all gospel proclamation, and distraction will become more and more appealing as we attempt to mitigate the choice anxiety we feel.

As Wellspring’s pastor, I see this future unfolding before me. And that is why I decided to focus this doctoral project on addressing the effects of secularism on spiritual formation at Wellspring. This doctoral project is my first step towards addressing the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 143.

<sup>2</sup> James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 3-4, Kindle.

negative effects of secularism at Wellspring Church. My hope is that this doctoral project provides a meaningful way to address the background assumptions of secularism—such as the immanent frame, the age authenticity, and the cross-pressured experience of modern life.

One of the primary challenges of secularism is that its “beliefs have not so much been argued as assumed.”<sup>3</sup> They are “communicated to us at an almost subconscious level,”<sup>4</sup> and offer a “practical atheism” that presents “the fruit of shalom minus the tree of biblical faith.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, this doctoral project seeks to raise the effects of secularism to a conscious level by developing both a theological and practical way forward.

Theologically, this doctoral project offers a biblical counterpoint to secularism’s main assumptions: that God is present even though secularism presumes his absence. That life is eternal even if one’s neighbors live by “YOLO.” That community matters even if the individual is assumed to be king. That authenticity is important but not ultimate. That, even if the church settles for so much less, it is called to be so much more: God’s faithful presence in the world.

Practically, this doctoral project also offers a training manual that is delivered as a communal experience. The hope is to create a place where people can dialogue about their life with God, where people can learn from one another, and in the process draw

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2016), 18, Kindle.

<sup>4</sup> Sayers, *Disappearing Church*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Sayers, *Disappearing Church*, 11.

near to both God and each other. The hope is to create a rich, lab-like, context for experimentation where people learn to take risks and share their experiences with others.

By creating these experimenting communities, it is my hope that a “creative minority” is shaped within the congregation of Wellspring who can navigate the challenges of the secular West.<sup>6</sup> From the Scriptures, it is clear “after every exile there is a return, after every destruction the ruins can be rebuilt, after every crisis there can be a rebirth.”<sup>7</sup> But this often depends on a creative minority who seeks God in the midst of upheaval.

Because “creative minorities find themselves withdrawn and distant from what they know and find comfort in,” they are often able to “see the myths and blind spots of their own culture, to reject these myths, and find a greater dependency in God,” a deeper connection with one another, and even a way to embody the presence of God outside church walls.<sup>8</sup> It is clear to me that Wellspring needs a creative minority who recognizes that renewal will not result from “the same patterns of life and ministry,” but rather grow from different formative habits and practices—which, in turn, shape us into new people.<sup>9</sup>

It is my hope that through this process adults at Wellspring will discover life-giving ways to encounter God in a world shaped by the immanent frame. They will learn ways to cultivate meaningful community in a world shaped by the “buffered self” in the

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<sup>6</sup> Sayers, *Disappearing Church*, 50.

<sup>7</sup> Sayers, *Disappearing Church*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Sayers, *Disappearing Church*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Sayers, *Reappearing Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2019), 11, Kindle.

age of authenticity. And they will find the courage to be God's faithful presence in a "cross-pressured," doubt-filled, world. As a church, we cannot thrive without God's presence, each other's support, or a calling beyond themselves to bless the world. This project is based on this hope—that the adults at Wellspring will not only endure through the challenges of the secular West but flourish with God, each other, sent into the world as God's faithful presence.



APPENDIX A  
EXCERPT FROM TRAINING MANUAL

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## PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Have you ever stood on the shore and seen a whale? I did not know it was possible until I moved to Monterey Bay.<sup>1</sup> In fact, I saw more than 20 whales from the shoreline my first year living in Pacific Grove, California. What's interesting is that my wife, who lives in the same town and the same home, has not seen one whale since we arrived. She is endlessly frustrated (and a bit jealous) by the difference. She thinks it is simply my good luck. But I have a different theory.

To spot a whale you need to stand on the shoreline or get on a boat. To see many whales, you need to spend a lot of time on the shoreline or on the water. There is no way around it. Whales are ONLY seen when you look out into the water. And here is the rub. My wife and I spend vastly different amounts of time on the shoreline. Sure, we live in the same town, in the same house—only four blocks from the water, in fact. So, you might presume that this would get you a whale sighting. But it doesn't. You still need to walk along the shore with your eyes out into Monterey Bay and the Pacific Ocean or hop into a boat and go for a ride.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this section is adapted from Tony Traback, "The Shoreline, Whales and God's Presence" (Independent Study with Richard Beck, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2019).

Now, you might wonder, “What the heck does this have to do with God?” Well, this is the thing: encountering God is not all that different from seeing a whale. I cannot summon a whale any more than I can summon God. But there are things within my control that I can do to increase the chances that I see a whale (or, for that matter, encounter God). And that is what this manual is all about. What can we do to increase the chances that we will encounter (or more likely be encountered by) God? And as this manual unfolds, we will see that God encounter is also intimately connected to community and what it means for the church to be God’s faithful presence in the world. But for now, let’s return to seeing whales.

Because when we moved to the Monterey Peninsula, neither my wife nor I had any idea what it took to see whales. I think we both assumed that, given enough time, living by the ocean, we were bound to see one (most likely while on boat). But, as my wife will tell you, after a few years, it had not happened. There are many reasons for this—just as there are many reasons for why we don’t more regularly enjoy the presence of God.

In this introduction, my hope is to explore what limits our ability to encounter God and experience his presence. To do this, we are going to consult Charles Taylor’s book, *A Secular Age*, for direction. It’s a tome. Long and some might add, hard to read. But it also provides profound insight into how we see the world, how we see ourselves, and how we experience life.

## #1: How We See the World

In the secular west, life is primarily (if not exclusively) focused on “this life” and how we live it. Hence, our focus on YOLO (“you only live once”) and maximizing our time on earth. James K.A. Smith, riffing on Taylor, provides a helpful metaphor. He writes, “Like the roof on Toronto’s SkyDome, the heavens are beginning to close. But we barely notice, because our new focus on this plane had already moved the transcendent to our peripheral vision at best. We’re so taken with the play on this field, we don’t lament the loss of the stars overhead.”<sup>2</sup> Life, in our culture, is measured, defined and ultimately played with only earthly, material, and human dreams, goals, and means in mind. As a culture, we are captivated by the things of earth and lost interest in the things of heaven.

Since this is just “our normal,” it is hard to appreciate how different this is historically. Taylor believes that this was not true of any “previous society.”<sup>3</sup> One way to appreciate the scale of this shift is to consider that in 1500 it was “virtually impossible to not believe in God,” whereas today “many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”<sup>4</sup>

Ok, so what? Why does this matter? Well, in this environment, it is easy, without even realizing it, to be a Christian that does not presume and expect the presence of God in everyday life. When this happens, churches and Christians start to focus, instead, on learning about God and changing our behaviors (neither of which necessarily presume

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, James K. A.. *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), Kindle Edition, 51.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

God's presence). Neither of these things are, of course, bad. But there is a big difference between being with God (in his presence) and learning about him.

For example, down the street from me, next to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, there is a place called Hopkins Research Institute (where Stanford University trains future scientists.) Every so often, they open their gates to the public and share what they are learning about ocean life. One Saturday, at one of these “educate the public days,” my son Josiah learned how to put a tracking beacon on a whale. He held an enormously long pole with a beacon at its end and tried to stick it to a ball, nearly 30 feet away. He had a blast. And as least theoretically, my son learned how to secure a beacon on a passing whale.

And yet, I also remember being on Monterey Bay one fall day, astonished as Humpback whales, larger than buses, with their knobby heads and long pectoral fins, launched into the sky. We also saw blue whales—the largest animal to ever live, larger than any dinosaur—swimming by. They were so large, so powerful, it was like a skyscraper tipped over and was frolicking, in the water, by our boat. My point is this: the difference between my son theoretically learning to place a beacon on a whale and actually seeing a whale (let alone putting a beacon on it)—is the difference between learning about God and being with God.

Learning about God is great. But it is entirely different than actually being with God. And when we live in a “SkyDome” world (by mantras like YOLO), we are shaped into a people who don't expect God to actually show up at our doorstep, or sit next to us in the car on the way to work, or chill with us on the couch as we endlessly search Netflix. So, instead, we settle for learning about God. We settle for behavior change. We

end up more like Job's friends, then Job in the whirlwind (Job 38-42). And as you might assume, this has profound effects on our relationship with God.

## **#2: How We See Ourselves**

My favorite exhibit at the Monterey Bay Aquarium is the Open Ocean. It is a massive tank with sea turtles, halibut, a shark, and a huge swarm of anchovies. My son enjoys the penguins. He likes them because air bubbles come out of their rear feathers and look like farts. Yes, he is five. But I laugh too.

I share this simple story because our cultural context not only assumes that the material world is the only world, but it also creates a context in which we live profoundly separated from one another. Just as the glass separates the penguins from the humans walking around the aquarium, we live as if we are separated from one another and creation itself. While screens and technology do not help, there is a more profound separation at work.

Five hundred years ago, people lived vulnerable lives—not oversharing their lives on Instagram “vulnerable”—but they felt vulnerable to good and bad spirits, God and the Devil. More like living inside the Open Ocean exhibit at the Aquarium—with sharks and other large animals. A walk in the woods was never simply a walk in the woods—but a dangerous sylvan adventure, where wood spirits might harm, charm, and impact you.

God wasn't simply a personal belief, as if He were a food one liked (or did not) at a large buffet. Like pizza or broccoli. God was seen at the ultimate protector and safe

guard “in this awe-inspiring and frightening field of forces.”<sup>5</sup> And likewise, “the prospect of rejecting God” was not the personal choice we presume today (without apparent and obvious immediate consequence) but profound risk taking in this “field of forces.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike our secular age, “the social bond at all levels was intertwined with the sacred.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, when someone went down the road of unbelief, there was a strong communal motivation to “bring him back into line”—not simply for his benefit but for the benefit of the larger community.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, Taylor writes that we live in an “age of authenticity.” We say to ourselves, “I have to discover my own route to wholeness and spiritual depth,” and so our “focus is on the individual, and on his/her experience.”<sup>9</sup> There is a sense of self, distinct from the world, that is *me*—with its own “autonomous order.”<sup>10</sup> Meaning, that which used to exist in the world, now exists within the individual person.<sup>11</sup> If my belief does not directly hurt anyone, then I am free to think, feel and do as I wish.

Recently, over Thanksgiving, as we sat down to dinner, I was asked about our church, Wellspring. I simply replied how fun it was to see God at work in people’s lives, and someone at the table replied (even though I wasn’t even talking to her), “Just don’t

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<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 507.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 28-29.

tell me what to believe. I hate that.” It was like an immediate and powerful allergic reaction. My belief led to defensiveness and a focus on authenticity. And her reaction is not surprising given our cultural context.

Over the last five-hundred years, our self-perception has changed radically—from vulnerable beings who need each other and God to self-sufficient beings, whose primary goal is to live authentic lives. As you might imagine, this profoundly impacts our life with God and our experience of community. And “it is not just that people sacrifice” their “relationships” in order “to pursue their careers. Something like this has always existed. The point is that today many people feel called to do this, feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they didn't do it.”<sup>12</sup> Quite clearly, how we see ourselves has significantly shifted, and so has our experience of God and of life.

### **#3: How We Experience Life**

My son Josiah has a hard time deciding what to eat, especially for breakfast. In my more patient moments, I would give him 3 or even 4 options. I thought I was being kind and generous (“dad of the year” status), until my son told me quite clearly one morning, “You are giving me too many choices. It is overwhelming and I cannot decide.” My options, which I assumed were helpful, were, in reality, paralyzing.

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Press, 1991), 17.



Choices are great, but as my son so astutely informed me, they are not always helpful. And this does not only apply to breakfast options. Opinions on faith, religion, atheism, and meaning, more generally, multiply daily. Because of this, in Taylor's words, faith and meaning are always "contested."<sup>13</sup> No matter what we believe, it is undermined and challenged by another possibility—whether it is consumerism, faith in Jesus, or simply another vision of the good life.<sup>14</sup> Hence the proliferation of terms like FOMO ("fear of missing out") and FOBO ("fear of a better offer"). While this certainly applies to small choices, like whether to attend that birthday party or go rock climbing, it also affects bigger choices—what we believe is true, right and beautiful in the world.

Taylor makes the case that, because of these options, "we never move to a point beyond all anticipation, beyond all hunches, to the kind of certainty."<sup>15</sup> Our faith, accordingly, is imbued with various amounts of doubt—a question mark that haunts deep and profound conviction—which makes belief more fragile.<sup>16</sup> As one might imagine, this often makes us feel less comfortable sharing our faith outside church walls. While God calls us to be his faithful presence in the world, we feel so filled with doubt that we retreat to the safe confines of the know and comfortable. We retreat to constant learning and unending seasons of preparation—until we "feel" ready. But sadly, this time never arrives because the cross-pressures do not subside. Visions of the good life are always spawning new offspring. And, accordingly, distraction becomes more and more

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 551.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor calls this the "fragilizing effect of pluralism." See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 304.

appealing. If belief is difficult to embrace with conviction, then why not watch another show on Netflix or play another round of video games? When belief becomes increasingly complex, distraction becomes increasingly alluring as we attempt to mitigate the choice anxiety we feel.

### **Putting These Pieces Together**

Our culture affects us. This is inescapable. And currently, the gravity of our cultural moment pulls us away from the shoreline, undermining our experience of God's presence, our connection with one another, and our faithful presence in the world. Our culture presumes a focus on earthly matters (often excluding God's transcendent presence). It emphasizes authentic expression—often, separating us from a perceived need for God and others. And, with all the possible choices available, it fragilizes our belief—and in so doing, undermines our witness.

#### *Questions to Consider:*

- 1) When was the last time you experienced God's presence? What was it like? How would you describe the ingredients that made that encounter possible? Do you ever feel like God is distant or unavailable? Why do you think this is?
- 2) How would you describe your relationships and experience of community? What do you think gets in the way of you cultivating deeper relationships? What do you think of the Thanksgiving story above? Have you ever had a "do not tell me what to do" response?
- 3) How would you describe your experience of doubt? How does it affect you? Do you feel more excited or intimidated by the fact that God invites you to be His faithful presence in the world?

## PART TWO: GOD ENCOUNTERS

This, however, is not the end of the story. We are not ultimately powerless or without hope. We can, instead, attempt to cultivate shoreline practices: habits and practices that help us to encounter God (despite the difficulty of our current cultural moment). In the sections that follow we will explore seven specific practices—story, space, food, vocation, messengers, word, and time. Obviously, these habits are not magic wands. Just as not every run, hike or stroll along the shoreline leads to a whale sighting, so not every practice (or attempted practice) leads to an encounter with God.

Mark Sayers, in *Reappearing Church*, writes, “The pattern is not a guaranteed formula.”<sup>17</sup> And Sayers is correct. We cannot force God to show up, and yet, if we do not go to the shoreline (near the water or on it), then we will never see a whale. The only way to encounter God is to go to the shoreline and wait for God to appear.

### Story

My first day in Pacific Grove, as I walked along the coastline, I saw a grey whale. I was excited and told anyone who would listen. Clearly, my whale sighting led to

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Sayers, *Reappearing Church: The Hope for Renewal in the Rise of Our Postmodern Culture*, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2019), 36-37, Kindle.

storytelling. But that is not all. As I look back on that day, I think my first day whale sighting and subsequent story telling also created future expectation—that if I walk along the shore enough, I will see more whales—that whales are see-able, that the possibility of whale sightings are a normal part of everyday life. While surely seeing the whale led to the storytelling, I think the storytelling affected my future expectations even more than the sighting itself.

Stories are powerful. They are not simply a way to share our experience with others. They profoundly shape our perceived reality and expectation. James K.A. Smith, in *Speaking in Tongues*, explains that stories impact what we consider possible, what we can imagine, and because of this, they help us to “make sense of our world and our experience.”<sup>18</sup>

This is true for modern people and it was also true for the apostle Paul. Smith writes, “what Paul preached, and what Paul was calling both Jews and Gentiles to embrace, was not just a constellation of ideas, a set of beliefs, or a collection of doctrines; rather, their salvation depended on affectively and imaginatively absorbing a story — and seeing themselves in that story.”<sup>19</sup> For Paul, stories were not only the means by which he shared the gospel but also the means by which people embraced the possibility of Jesus, as God. Paul knew that if people were going to encounter the Living God and enjoy His presence, the story which in which they lived was not inconsequential but key.

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<sup>18</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 66, Kindle.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 69-70.

Just as my whale sighting and subsequent story telling furnished a whale-sighting expectation, so our storytelling is central to our expectation of seeing God and experiencing his presence. Seen in this way, storytelling becomes an essential way that we create thirst for God. This is why storytelling is the first practice—because encountering God has less to do with “knowing and believing” than “hungering and thirsting.”<sup>20</sup> And stories shape what we imagine to be possible.

Stories also affect us emotionally and emotions are intimately connected to motivation. Smith writes, “what is distinctive about narrative knowledge is found in the connection between narratives and emotions. Narratives articulate a kind of ‘emotional understanding.’”<sup>21</sup> And “our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, stories not only shape our imagination (how we see the world) but what we feel about it and what we want in it. Stories are a fuel which informs whether we will take the time and make the space to walk down to the shoreline and wait for God.

### *Practice #1: Personal Timeline*

All you need for this exercise is two things: post-it notes and a good-sized poster board. First, begin writing important people, places and events, both positive and negative, from your life on post-it notes. Second, organize your post-it notes

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<sup>20</sup> James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 2, Kindle.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 1-2.

chronologically on your poster board. Your timeline should move from top to bottom and left to right across the board. Third, every life story can be organized into chapters. As you look at your post-it notes, you may be able to see three to five key chapters of your story. Feel free to move your post-it notes around to reflect these chapters as needed. Using blue post-it notes (or just a different color), go to the top of your poster board and give each chapter a title. Choose titles that mean something to you. Step four, within each chapter, there are lessons to learn. What are they? What did you learn in? What do you dare not forget as you move forward? What do you want to take into the future?

### *Practice #2: Share Your Testimony*

You might consider thinking of your testimony as two distinct parts. First, what was your early experience of God like? Second, why did you continue to follow Jesus? Remember, why one continues to follow Jesus is as important as why one begins to follow. Write out your story. Pay attention to how God's presence shapes your belief. Say it out loud a few times. Shoot for about 10 minutes. And then share it with someone.

### *Practice #3: Re-Storying Your Search for God*

Too often, I limit my search for God to reading the Bible or singing a worship song—as if the only time I am “searching” is when I am making “holy choices.” But that isn’t the case. I am also searching when, in my restlessness, I go to the fridge for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time (for mint chip ice cream) and to the TV again (for another Netflix binge). These less polished moments, when I am clearly hungering and thirsting for more, are also, at their core, a search for God. While they may be broken expressions, they do reveal a desire

within me for more. As I scroll through all the possible shows on Netflix, I am looking for something to satisfy me. As I go the fridge (yet again), I am looking for something to bring me peace—when I am anxious, afraid, sad and bored. Naming these broken expressions, as part of my search, is a way for me to re-story my hunger and thirst for God. As a practice, pay attention to behaviors in your life that you could re-story as your search for God. Select one, and when you do that behavior, label it as a part of your “search” and simply say to God, “I am looking for you. Please draw near” and listen for His invitation.

*Questions to Consider:*

- 1) When you did the time-line exercise what did you notice? As you reflected on your story how was God present in ways you had not noticed previously?
- 2) Having written your testimony, what stood out to you? How has your life changed as a result of God’s presence?
- 3) How would you narrate your search for God? Are there ways you search for God that you did not previously notice as “searching”? Describe them.

**Space**

Unless I set up cameras on the shoreline or find an ultra-powerful (Hubble level) telescope that can see through trees and houses, I need, as an embodied creature, to walk to the shoreline to see whales. The distance between my house and Monterey Bay is the difference between seeing enormous whales and seeing seagull poop on the roof of my 2003 Toyota Corolla parked in my driveway. Space matters.

When we turn to the Bible, however, space is a bit trickier to understand. Genesis tells us that God made all space by making all creation. We can say, therefore, with utter confidence that God is “found in all space and all space is grounded and has its origin in God.”<sup>23</sup> Now, one might, from this basic conviction, assume that space almost becomes irrelevant—since God is everywhere. This, however, would miss the Biblical point. In the Scriptures, God always reveals himself in a particular space—like a “hotspot” of his presence. He appears to Moses in a burning bush and tells him that he is standing on holy ground (Ex 3:5).

Later, in the tabernacle and the temple, God dwells so profoundly in these spaces that the psalmist cries out, “LORD, I love the house where you live, the place where your glory dwells” (Ps 24:6). In the New Testament, Paul’s teaching is similar. Instead of telling the early church that God lives within a building, he teaches that the Holy Spirit lives within believers (whose bodies function like the temple of old). In 1 Cor 6:19, he writes, “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you.”

These “hotspots” of God’s presence remind us that God can reveal himself anywhere. They are a “reminder of the potential epiphany of all other spaces.”<sup>24</sup> And this is important because space, as embodied creatures, “is inescapable: we encounter it the moment we emerge from our front door, drive to the out of town shopping center or visit the local post office.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, space is not only inescapable, it also is not neutral.

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<sup>23</sup> T.J. Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 36.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 26.



When we enter a space, it affects us. Whether it is a “a factory, a state, or a community,” it is all too easy “to conform to its supposed requirements in ways that are both predictable and unthinking.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, space has the capacity to both “express and affect” what we think and how we live in the world.<sup>27</sup> “People en-story and en-soul their places” and their “their places en-soul them.”<sup>28</sup> This is part of what it means to be a creature created by God and placed within space.<sup>29</sup>

This does not mean, however, that we are powerless over the spaces in which we dwell. We have the ability to transform a “space” into a “place.” Gorringer, in *A Theology of the Built Environment*, explains that “a place is a space which has a distinct character,” and that places can be transformed into “sacred places” to “orientate us and help us find identity” in God.<sup>30</sup> By paying close attention to the space we inhabit, we can attempt to live, as the Psalmist presumes, in the “shelter of the Most High” and “abide in the shadow of the Almighty” (Ps 91:1).

### *Practice #1: Home and Office*

If we presume that the spaces we inhabit shape us, it is important to begin with a quick diagnostic of our current environments. Set aside 10-15 minutes to just be in your office (or where you spend the most time at work) and your home (specifically the room

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<sup>26</sup> Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>29</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 1993), 144.

<sup>30</sup> Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 38.

in which you spend the most time). Ask yourself, “what does this room/space tell me about what is most important in life? What does this room tell me about God (if anything)?” Write down your responses. Having done your quick diagnostic, prayerfully consider what you might change in these spaces to make God more central, to remind you of God’s goodness and presence? What could you do to make these spaces places of God’s presence? How might you re-order this space?

### *Practice #2: Enjoy the Beauty of Creation*

Spaces shape us. But it would be a mistake to presume that the only shaping space is built by human hands. The built environment (where we live and work) affects us but so does the created world that God has made (Ro 1:20; Ps 19). For this practice, therefore, pick a spot outside to enjoy. Maybe it is the woods or by the water or on a mountain. Take an hour (or a day) to enjoy it. Don't rush. Allow the space to affect you. Take 10 minutes to journal after this experience.

### *Questions to Consider:*

- 1) Did you select a room in your home or office? Why? Did anything about the space stand out to you? Did you make any changes to it?
- 2) Some people really experience the presence of God in beautiful places. What was your experience like?

## Food

The largest bone ever found on earth comes from the jaw of a Blue Whale. Imagine a bone, the size of “a football field goalpost attached to a moving, breathing being.”<sup>31</sup> It is with this field goal mouth that Blue Whales eat krill. While their bites are much larger than ours, humans, like whales, need to eat. Like whales, we eat to survive but we also eat for pleasure. We eat when we celebrate, and we eat when we mourn. Food is part of everyday human life. And from a biblical perspective, it cannot be disconnected from our life with God.

Ellen Davis in *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture* contrasts food production in Egypt with food provision in the Israelite’s exodus wanderings. In Egypt, she explains, “food was business” and “widely traded on the international market.”<sup>32</sup> And the people of God were slaves in this great mechanism of production. In contrast, after God rescues the people of Israel from Egypt and begins to form them into His people, food is seen differently—as a “clear sign of God’s immediate presence.”<sup>33</sup> God provides bread from heaven (manna) to feed his people, and the bread becomes a sign of both his presence and his provision (Exodus 16). Each day becomes a tangible and caloric reminder of God’s presence as the Israelites gather his provision in the desert each morning.

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<sup>31</sup> Nick Pyenson, *Spying on Whales: The Past, Present, and Future of Earth’s Most Awesome Creatures* (New York, NY: Viking, 2018), 130.

<sup>32</sup> Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 73.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

Food, in this paradigm, is not just about calories. It is not about human production or human ingenuity. It is about “knowing the work of YHWH.”<sup>34</sup> It is about the God who provides. Seen in this way, “eating is worshipful, even revelatory; it engenders a healthy knowledge of God.”<sup>35</sup> And the connection between food and the presence of God is not simply limited to Israel’s Exodus wanderings.

When God enters human history in the person of Jesus, he comes “eating and drinking” (Luke 7:34).<sup>36</sup> He tells his disciples to remember him through bread and wine. Michael Frost, in *Surprise the World*, writes, “the one thing Jesus actually told us to do every time we meet was to eat.”<sup>37</sup> Why? Because food and the presence of God go together.

We see this clearly in Lk 24. Two of Jesus’ disciples are walking to Emmaus, emotionally and personally devastated by Jesus’ crucifixion and death. Along the way, Jesus joins them (unbeknownst to them—they just think he is a fellow traveler). And as the sun begins to set, the two travelers decide to eat dinner and invite the mystery man to join them. They begin to eat and as they do, “their eyes are opened”—they recognize that the presence of God, the person of Jesus, is with them (Lk 24:31).

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>36</sup> Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community and Mission around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 12.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Frost, *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2015), 45, Kindle.

Ruth Haley Barton, in *Life Together in Christ*, tells us that food gives “them the opportunity to do something very ordinary together—to share a meal—and that meal became the context in which the most significant and revelatory moments of the whole journey took place.”<sup>38</sup> Even though, the two travelers invite Jesus in, oddly enough they end up being hosted by Him, and it is, through food, that they encounter him—the embodied presence of God.<sup>39</sup> Food and the presence of God go together. And this is why eating is such an important “shoreline” practice.

#### *Practice #1: Praying Before Meals*

Praying before meals is a regular and simple way to challenge a “materialist account of provision.”<sup>40</sup> It is a “reminder that the way things appear to us as modern people is not the truth of being”—that God is provider, not Egypt, not us.<sup>41</sup> As a practice, I would encourage you to thank God for your food and invite him to be with you as you eat—just as he revealed himself to the men on the road to Emmaus that he would reveal himself to you and whoever you are with.

#### *Practice #2: Celebrating the Lord’s Supper*

Jesus instructed his followers to remember him through food and drink. Christians

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<sup>38</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Life Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2014), 135.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 136-137.

<sup>40</sup> Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2018), 113.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 114.

call this meal Communion, the Lord's Supper and the Eucharist. First, make or buy some bread and wine (or grape juice). Second, select a place you want to celebrate communion. Third, if you want guidance on what to say, Paul gives a basic flow in 1 Cor 11:23-26. Fourth, as you eat and drink, slow down and be present with Jesus.

### *Practice #3: Fasting*

While food can certainly be a way to “go to the shoreline,” so can its absence. Fasting is a way to remind us (by removing it) that God is our provider. The hope is to create an absence so that you can pray for the presence of God to be with you. What you fast from is less important than fasting itself, but the food chosen should be important enough to be missed and therefore lead to prayer. Try fasting a meal, a day, or 72 hours. When you feel hungry, try to remember that God is your sustainer, and that he is present with you. See how it goes. Journal after.

### *Questions to Consider:*

- 1) Do you normally pray before meals? Why or why not? Did this experience shift your perspective? Explain.
- 2) Narrate how you celebrated communion. What elements did you use and where did you receive them? How would you describe God's presence (or absence) during communion?
- 3) From what did you decide to fast? Why did you make that selection? In removing that item (items), how did you, in turn, make room for the presence of God? Remember, fasting isn't just about “taking away” but “making room” for God's presence.

## Vocation

I can walk to the shoreline, from my home, in 8 minutes. If I run, I can get there in half that time. If my calendar was empty, I could literally go the shoreline all the time. But as you might guess, my calendar is not empty. So, on most of my shoreline trips, I am trying to leverage my time—by walking my dog (a Dalmatian/Labrador mix) or running, and it is, while I am doing one of these two things, that I see whales.

Our spiritual lives are similar. Few people have empty calendars. We work 40 hours a week or take care of a family or attend school. Currently, I work full time as a pastor, come home to a family, and am finishing my doctoral degree. If I cannot be in God's presence as a pastor, spouse, father and student, then I only have a few short little breaks in my day to be with God—which was never God's intention.<sup>42</sup>

Jesus promises, when he sends his disciples into the world, that he will always be with them—he doesn't say “when you take 20 minutes in the morning and read your Bible, I will be there.” He tells them, “remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). He is always with us—whether we are bankers or drivers, single or married, have bio-kids, foster kids or no kids. Jesus promises to be present. This is why connecting vocation (what we are called to do with the time we have) to the promised presence of God is so important.

In the busyness of everyday life, however, this is easier said than done. It is also complicated by the simple fact that we live in a broken and sinful world that has

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<sup>42</sup>Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 91, Kindle.

significant implications on our vocations (both work and relationships). The first few chapters of Genesis make this clear. Before the fall, Adam and Eve lived both connected to one another and with the presence of God. The text says that Adam and Eve are “naked and unashamed”—which is how the author tells us that they had everything they needed emotionally and relationally (Gen 2:25).<sup>43</sup> G.J. Wenham, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, explains, “here in the garden which is full of symbols of the divine presence, where God himself regularly comes to meet with them, they were nude but unashamed. Since the relationships between man and wife and between them and their creator are unclouded by sin, there is no need for them to cover up. The fullness of their fellowship is here most vividly expressed.”<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, before sin enters the world, Adam is called to tend and keep the garden (Gen 2:15).<sup>45</sup> He is called to work. Again, Wenham writes, “it should be noted that even before the fall man was expected to work; paradise was not a life of leisured unemployment...the biblical narrative gives no hint that the creator is shuffling off his load onto man: work is intrinsic to human life.”<sup>46</sup> Importantly, work does not negatively affect human life or human relationships or one’s connection with God.

But then the fall changes everything. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit; they go their own way, chart their own course and things quickly fall apart. God, as usual, is walking in the garden. He is present. Rather than enjoying his presence, though, Adam

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<sup>43</sup> G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Dallas TX: Word, 1987), 72.

<sup>44</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 88.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.



and Eve hide, and “the trees that God created for man to look at are now his hiding place to prevent God seeing him.”<sup>47</sup> There is an immediate break in the human connection with God.

The breakdown, however, continues. Shortly after, Adam blames Eve for their predicament, “implying that it was really God’s fault for giving him this woman” and “setting man against his dearest companion.”<sup>48</sup> As if this was not enough, the work, which Adam enjoyed in the garden, is also filled with “hardship and frustration.”<sup>49</sup> It is the “toil that now lies behind the preparation of every meal” which stands in stark contrast to the “ready supply of food within the garden” before the fall.<sup>50</sup>

In the beginning God created a world in which our vocation (the roles we are called to in life) was not severed from our connection to God, our enjoyment of His presence. The fall, though, splintered these various aspects of our lives—such that our callings (the relational and work roles we embrace) often feel totally disconnected from the presence of God. Work can be quite hard, tiring and boring. Relationships are rarely easy. This is true within marriage, as parents and in singleness. Hence, why we need to find ways to reconnect our vocations (work, marriage, parenting, singleness) with the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 82.

presence of God.<sup>51</sup> We need to discover ways to reconnect our “callings” with the One Calling us.<sup>52</sup>

### *Practice #1: Work*

First, make a list of every job you have worked. Paid or unpaid. Next to each job write down one thing you learned from God through that job. Make a list of the various skills and strengths God gave through your work. The goal is to look for the ways God has been present (behind the scenes), through your work, to shape and form you.

Second, in the morning (as you enter the office or sit down at your desk) ask God to be present with you as you go about your workday. At the end, talk with God about it. Ask him to show you how he was present during it.

### *Practice #2: Marrieds, Single, Parents*

First, start by identifying 3 things that God is teaching you (i.e., what you are learning) in your marriage, in your singleness, and/or your parenting. These could be things you are learning about yourself or the world. Write them down and then thank God for what He is teaching you.

Second, in the morning (as you wake up) ask God to be present with you as you go about your day. Notice how these roles (married, single, parent) shape your day. Pay

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<sup>51</sup> Scazzero helpfully includes marriage and singleness into this vocational framework. See Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 86.

<sup>52</sup> Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 31, Kindle.

attention to places of gratefulness and discouragement. What stands out? At the end of the day, talk with God about your reflections.

*Questions to Consider:*

- 1) How did you see God's presence in your "work"? What has He been teaching you? What was it like to thank Him for all that he has taught you?
- 2) This week you were asked to invite God into your workday. How did that go? Did you notice his presence more than normal? Was it helpful to review your day and talk with God about it? Why or why not?
- 3) How is God at work in your marriage and/or parenting and/or singleness? Do you know? Try and describe it.
- 4) What was it like to invite God into your marriage and/or parenting and/or singleness? Did it effect your awareness of his presence? What effect did, reviewing his presence, at the end of the day have on your awareness of his presence?

### **Messengers**

Often, when I walk the shoreline, I do not see whales. But this doesn't mean that I don't see any life. I might see otters lying on their backs or dolphins swimming, anchovies swarming or birds gliding. These creatures remind me that there is life beyond human homes. I don't always need to see a whale to be reminded that the ocean is teeming with life.

In a similar way, in our life with God, other beings can remind us of and direct us toward God. These "other beings" are called angels. And just as it takes some effort to walk to the shoreline to see an otter or a seal, so it takes a bit of effort to discern the presence of angels. While angels are often present, we do not always immediately see them.

Consider the Old Testament story of Elisha, his servant and the king of Aram (2 Kings 6:8-17). Imagine it. The King of Aram surrounds Elisha with an army. Elisha's servant is terrified. But Elisha is not. The primary difference is simply that Elijah sees angels. Elijah, recognizing that his servant has not discerned the presence of God's messengers, prays "open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see," and immediately, the servant's eyes are opened, and he sees the hills full of angels, chariots and fire (2 Kings 6:17). Here, the difference between terror and an awareness of God's presence is the ability to discern the presence of angels.

It is striking, in fact, how often angels are mentioned in Scripture. "They are in the Garden of Eden (or at the gate); they visit Abraham and Moses and the prophets. In one episode after another, they are present with Jesus, from the cradle to the cross to the empty tomb to the Ascension. And they make their usual visitations to the apostles Paul, Peter, and John."<sup>53</sup> They are, moreover, not just cool demonstrations of an unseen reality—like an impressive light show at a concert. Angels exist "to speak the message of God to humans." In this way, angels point us to God.<sup>54</sup> Like dolphins in the bay, they remind us of God's activity in the world.

While I cannot claim to have had seen many angels, one spring, while training for the Big Sur Marathon, I am pretty sure I talked to one. I was in line at a local bakery, when an older woman (who was extraordinarily slow ordering her croissant and whose husband was seriously deaf) asked me what happened to my knee (which was injured and

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<sup>53</sup> Scot McKnight, *The Hum of Angels* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2018), Chapter 3, Kindle.

<sup>54</sup> McKnight, *The Hum of Angels*, Chapter 3.

wrapped in a bandage). I tried to answer her quickly so she could finish her order but then, literally out of nowhere, she asks me, “what did God say about it?” Normally, I might have dismissed her question but that very morning, God has told me to slow down and be with him (i.e., stop running on my hurt knee).

If you were expecting the heavens to open, they did not. But what this old woman did was what angels do. She re-directed me back to God. She pastored me “into the grace of God.”<sup>55</sup> She reminded me what it meant to worship Him (to put him at the center of my life)—which is something angels do all the time in the Scriptures.

If you flip through the Bible, angels are always putting God at the center in worship. Consider Rev 5:12. John gets a glimpse into heaven and what does he hear? Angels worshipping God, saying, in unison, “Worthy is the Lamb!” The same thing happens to Isaiah. The angelic host is entirely focused on God, crying out, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty” (Isa 6). Or consider what the shepherds see when they learn of Jesus’ birth. They see angels worshipping God and singing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven” (Lk 2:12). Angel model what it looks like to put God at the center and worship Him.

Not all angels, however, are God-worshippers. There are also angels who “are not doing God’s work”—“rebellious, bad angels, often called ‘demons’ or ‘evil spirits.’”<sup>56</sup> In the New Testament, these bad-angels possess people (Luke 8:26-39), tempt Jesus

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<sup>55</sup> McKnight, *The Hum of Angels*, Chapter 5.

<sup>56</sup> McKnight, *The Hum of Angels*, Chapter 4.

(Matthew 4:1-11) and look to devour (1 Peter 5:8). Because of this, James tells followers of Jesus to “resist” them (James 4:7).

But, as modern people, we often assume that belief in angels and demons is “superstitious and quaint, like a retreat to the Dark Ages when we burned witches and thought the sun revolved around the earth.”<sup>57</sup> This, however, is like believing in whales but not dolphins—because dolphins are too small to exist. “If God, who cannot be seen, exists, why would anyone refuse to believe in lesser-but-just-as-invisible angels and spirits? If we grant the reality of an invisible world, the supernatural, a reality just beyond ours, why would we put limits on what’s out there?”<sup>58</sup>

This is especially true, if “what’s out there,” can truly help us to draw nearer to God. Angels have the potential to remind us that the world is not simply the visible world. In our disenchanted age, it is easy to focus on what we can see and touch and yet, in the process, not only do we end up skipping over angels but God as well.

### *Practice #1: Angel Sightings*

Each day pay attention to the presence of angels. Keep your eyes open. It could be a seemingly chance encounter with a stranger (or friend), a wrong turn that leads to an unexpected experience, a near accident averted, or a seemingly meaningful dream. At the

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Beck, *Reviving Old Scratch: Demons and the Devil for Doubters and the Disenchanted* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 4-5, Kindle.

<sup>58</sup> McKnight, *The Hum of Angels*, Chapter 1.

end of the day, write in your journal what could have possibly been an angel's hand or presence. And then ask God about it.

### *Practice #2: Temptation and Devils*

Each day pay attention to the possibility of demons. One way to do this is to pay attention to the moments when you feel tempted away from God or feel distant from him. Maybe it is problems that arrive at work or in your family. Whatever it is, take a moment, when you feel pulled away from God, to pray. Ask God to be with you and pray against the work of the devil. For a deeper look into how demons operate, you might consider reading *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis.

### *Questions to Consider:*

- 1) What was it like to look for angels? Did you see any? How did you come to that conclusion?
- 2) What was it like to pay attention to the work of the devil in your life? Did you notice any demonic influence? How so? And if so, what did you do in response?

## **Word**

To see whales, one must go to the shoreline or get on a boat. There is no other way. You cannot see a live whale in a book. Books teach many things: how whales migrate, how much time they spend submerged under water and what types of whales live in specific bodies of water. But you cannot be in the presence of a whale in a textbook. And similarly, in our life with God, information about Him does not equal being with Him. They are simply different things.

Consider this. When Jesus returns, makes all things new and establishes his kingdom on earth, the Bible tells us that there will be a great feast. God will be there. His people will be at the table with him. But what do you think happens next? Does God lead everyone in an effective and meaningful Bible study? Likely not. Why not? Because we would just talk to God. He will be there. We won't need a Bible to direct, guide and reveal God's heart to us. We will talk to him face to face.

But until that beautiful day, when Jesus returns and establishes his Kingdom on earth, the Bible functions sort of like a whale watching boat. It gets you much closer to where the whales are. Now, as I have said, you can see whales from the shoreline. And I have (many times). But my most breath-taking whale watching moment happened from a boat in the middle of Monterey Bay. We saw dozens of humpback whales flipping and flopping; I saw blue whales rising and submerging. It was like nothing I'd seen from shore. And in the same way, you can encounter God on a mountain peak or in a Redwood grove. God is present everywhere. But he is particularly present in the Bible.

N.T. Wright, in *Simply Christian*, attempts to tease out the Bible's importance by explaining that it is "one of the points where heaven and earth overlap and interlock."<sup>59</sup> It is a mobile and written "hotspot" of God's presence. But, like anything else, if it is approached with the wrong posture, it can be used to justify terrible ends (crusades, witch hunts, and slavery) or simply be a dull read.

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<sup>59</sup> NT Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 181.



To avoid this, let us consider Eli's instructions to Samuel in 1 Samuel 3. Samuel, a young boy, hears God's voice and assumes that Eli, the adult and priest with whom Samuel lives, is calling him. Three times Samuel goes to Eli, but after the third time, Eli finally understands "the Lord is calling the boy," and he tells Samuel "go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening'" (1Sam 3:8-9). Eli helps Samuel to understand that God wants to talk to him, and that Samuel's role is to be a good listener.

When we apply Eli's instructions to our Bible reading, we avoid many of the Bible reading pitfalls many people experience. The Bible is God talking to us and our role is to "listen to God relationally."<sup>60</sup> The Bible was never meant to be a God-textbook, providing "true information about, or even an accurate running commentary upon, the work of God in salvation."<sup>61</sup> It is an invitation to participate in the unfolding story of salvation. God, through the Bible, is inviting us to join him—to listen for our role, our cue, our stage direction.

This shifts the locus of control. When we come to the Scriptures to hear God speak, we are allowing God to shape and inform our life with him—to be the center of our spiritual life, not our agenda or our wish dreams. Ruth Haley Barton writes, "Scripture becomes an instrument of God's control rather than a tool that we control to our own ends."<sup>62</sup> Scriptures truly becomes God's word to us.

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<sup>60</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2006), 50.

<sup>61</sup> N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2013), 28, Kindle.

<sup>62</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 51.

### *Practice #1: Lectio Divina*

Lectio Divina simply means sacred reading. It might, however, best be described as slowing down and listening to God's word to us. It is a three-part process. You can use any passage of Scripture, though I suggest starting with Ps 23. First, read through the text slowly, and pay attention to whatever word, phrase or person stands out to you. Second, read through the passage a second time. Allow the Spirit to reveal why that word, phrase or person stands out to you. Allow yourself 2-3 minutes to just sit and listen. Third, write a short message to God about what you "heard" in a journal.

### *Practice #2: Ignatius of Loyola and Imagination*

This process, like Lectio Divina, has three parts. First, select a story. Start with Mark 10:46-52, the story of Bartimaeus. Read the story 2-3 times. As you read, imagine the scene: the people, the sound of their voices, the weather, background sounds, and the smells. The point of this exercise is "not to turn the Bible into a Choose Your Own Adventure story but to let the Bible speak with a richness we often deny it."<sup>63</sup> After 15 minutes of imagining, journal about what stood out to you.<sup>64</sup>

### *Practice #3: Dwelling in the Word*

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<sup>63</sup> Mike Cospers, *Recapturing the Wonder: Transcendent Faith in a Disenchanted World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2017), 70.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

This practice, like Lectio Divina, focuses on listening to a Scripture but it is grounded in a community of at least 4 people. First, read through John 4 aloud. Have each person read one line, clockwise around the room. Second, silently reflect, as the text is read, what stands out to you. Third, when the reading is finished, turn to the person next to you and share what verse or word felt most meaningful and why. Fourth, and finally, as a large group, each person is invited to share what stood out to his/her neighbor (not their own reflections). The point is to refine our listening to God, while involving community.

*Questions to Consider:*

- 1) What part of Ps 23 stood out to you when you did the Lectio Divina? Why did it stand out?
- 2) How did the story of blind Bartimaeus come alive as you engaged your imagination? Did you find this helpful in drawing you into God's presence?
- 3) What did the person next to you hear, listening to John 4? Did you find the communal experience of Dwelling Prayer helpful or not?
- 4) Having tried Lectio Divina, Ignatius's imagination exercise, and Dwelling prayer, which word-based experiment did you find most helpful? Which experiment helped you connect with God's presence?

### **Time**

Everything takes time. A stroll to the shoreline. Taking a boat out into Monterey Bay. This is how God created creaturely existence. Alexander Schmemmann, in *For the Life of the World*, writes that "time" is the "first 'object' of our Christian faith and

action.”<sup>65</sup> Time, like space, is inescapable.<sup>66</sup> And we get to decide whether want to spend it, waste it, or kill it.

Imagine, for a moment, God’s existence before Genesis 1:1. Nothing exists other than God. He is all things. There is nothing that isn’t God. There is no time. All is God.<sup>67</sup> And then God acts. The first day. Time is created and it is within time that God both creates and places his creatures. On day 6, he forms cows and humans. On day 7, God rests within time—the very time he has made. God “creates the world and at the same time enters into it. He calls it into existence, and at the same time manifests himself through its being.”<sup>68</sup> And while God, each day, calls the day’s work good, it is only time (the 7<sup>th</sup> day) that he blesses (Gen 2:3).

This, however, is not all. The Hebrew understanding of time as linear was quite different from the Hellenistic understanding of cyclical time.<sup>69</sup> Said more simply, Greek time is measured in repeating cycles (fall, winter, spring, summer). For the Christian, time is going somewhere. It is “defined by its movement toward the fulfillment of God’s plan or design for the world, which will come about in and through time.”<sup>70</sup> Time is the

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<sup>65</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Yonkers, NY: Saint Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2018), 59.

<sup>66</sup> Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 59.

<sup>67</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 140-157.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Alexander Schmemnam, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 70.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

process by which we count down to God's return—like one might count down to the New Year in Time's square.

Despite the fact that God creates, blesses and reveals himself within time, “many of us today live in a kind of inner apartheid. We segregate out a small corner of pious activities and then can make no spiritual sense out of the rest of our lives.”<sup>71</sup> But if the Genesis account tells us anything, it tells us that God's presence is not limited to 30 minutes in the morning. The fullness of God entered every moment of time—every second, every minute, every hour. Because of this, Richard Foster, in his book entitled *Prayer*, makes the startling claim that “the discovery of God lies in the daily and the ordinary. If we cannot find God in the routines of home and shop, then we will not find him at all.”<sup>72</sup>

This is not only because God is everywhere but because God is everywhere at *all times*. Therefore, “going to the shoreline” is all about cultivating habits of discernment in time.<sup>73</sup> It is about “growing in the habit of recognizing the presence of Jesus” in time.<sup>74</sup> To provide structure to these time-based shoreline habits, it is helpful to think in terms of days, weeks and years.

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1992), 169.

<sup>72</sup> Foster, *Prayer*, 171.

<sup>73</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 111.

<sup>74</sup> Barton, *Life Together in Christ*, 140. In *Life Together in Christ*, Barton also has a noteworthy quote by Ernest Larkin which reads, “Discernment in its fullness takes a practiced heart.” See Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 110.

### *Practice #1: Praying the Hours*

Praying the hours (aka fixed-hour-prayer or the divine office) simply involves setting fixed times to pray during the day. First, carve out six 10-minute prayer times during your day. Second, read a psalm or say the Lord's prayer at each prayer time and then sitting in silence for 3 minutes after. Try this for seven days. Journal about it after.

### *Practice #2: The Examine*

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Ignatius, created the Examine to help his apprentices “discover how God has been present to us throughout the day and how we have responded to his loving presence.”<sup>75</sup> First, start the day with a prayer. Something like, “Please, Father, reveal yourself to me today—that I might see, feel, and encounter your presence.” Second, in the evening, take 10 minutes to look back to on your day and consider how God was present.

### *Practice #3: Sunday Sabbath*

While daily practices are worth exploring, it also worth trying out weekly practices. One core practice is the Sunday sabbath. First, start by attending a church service. Just be there. Second, after church, join some friends for food and togetherness. No pressure. No agenda. Just be with God's people. Third, in the afternoon, take some time alone with God. Go for a walk in the woods or just lay on your couch. The point isn't to accomplish anything but rest in God's presence.

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<sup>75</sup> Foster, *Prayer*, 27-28.

#### *Practice #4: Yearly Liturgies*

Depending on the time of year, focus on a different liturgy. During Advent, focus on Jesus' birth and desire to be with us (Lk1-2; Mt 1-2). During Lent, focus on Jesus' sacrifice and the horror of sin (Mark 14-15; John 18-19). During the 40 days leading up to Pentecost, focus on the Holy Spirit and the need for empowerment (Acts 2; Jn 14:15-26; 16:5-15; 20:19-23).

#### *Questions to Consider:*

- 1) Which daily practice did you find most helpful? Why?
- 2) How did you do for your Sunday Liturgy? How would you describe the experience?
- 3) Were you in Advent, Lent, or between Easter and Pentecost? If so, did you try something? What did you do? How did it go?

### PART THREE: COMMUNITY

To see a whale, you need to approach the shoreline. You need to muster up the energy and cultivate the discipline to move. While on one level this seems simple enough...clothes, shoes, and go. But in real life, it is rarely this simple. All new habits are simple in abstract. Read your Bible every day. It takes 10 minutes but how many people actually do it? Sleep 8 hours, exercise, and be nice to people. All of these rhythms are “easy” in abstract, but life is not lived in abstract.

A key to this change dynamic is community. As I shared earlier, my wife did not see any whales for her first year living in Pacific Grove. She was just getting to know people and did not want to walk alone. But when she got to know people, she started to walk to shoreline with them and guess what? She saw her first whale.

John Mark Comer in his book *Loveology* writes, “I cannot tell you how often I hear people say, ‘All you need is God.’ That makes for nice song lyrics, but the problem is, it’s just not true. God never says, ‘All you need is God.’ Adam has God, and it’s not



enough. God says, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone!’”<sup>76</sup> We are made for community.

In the sections that follow we will explore specific practices that bring us together as we seek the presence of God—discernment, reconciliation, and service. Obviously, these habits are not magic wands. Not every practice (or attempted practice) leads to community or an encounter with God. The only way to encounter God is to go to the shoreline, and sometimes we need the help of others to get there.

### **Discernment**

Every walk to the shoreline requires discernment. When should I go? Which location should I walk to? Where should I stop, wait, and rest? When it comes to my wife’s shoreline walks, she has found that it is best done in community. And I think she is unto something. One rarely arrives at clarity alone.<sup>77</sup>

The word “discernment comes from the Latin word *discernere*, which means ‘to separate,’ ‘to distinguish,’ ‘to determine,’ ‘to sort out.’”<sup>78</sup> And if I am honest, there is just so much to discern—where to work, whether to marry, and even small things like what to eat for dinner. Spiritually, I want to align my life with God’s invitation, but how do I do that?

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<sup>76</sup> John Mark Comer, *Loveology: God. Love. Marriage. Sex. And the Never-Ending Story of Male and Female* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 56, Kindle.

<sup>77</sup> A mentor of mine, Terry Walling, often says this.

<sup>78</sup> Suzanne G Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991), 23.

In *Listening Hearts*, Suzanne G Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward explain that “in ordinary circumstances, people analyze facts in order to come to a conclusion. While this is a useful exercise, it is not the same thing as discerning God’s call.”<sup>79</sup> In the words of Pascal, “the heart has its reasons, that reason does not know.”<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, when we attempt to discern on our own, “we see only partially.”<sup>81</sup> “God often reveals part of the picture to one person and another part to another person” and because of this, “it is prudent to consult one another to discern God’s counsel, guidance, and direction, even if there is no apparent reason to do so.”<sup>82</sup> For instance, Teresa of Avilla, one of the most powerful writers about the presence of God and spiritual formation in church history, only wrote her profoundly influential books because the community encouraged her to do so.<sup>83</sup> Without the discerning presence of her community, she would not have written the books that have influenced thousands of readers over the last five hundred years.

But communal discernment is quite cross cultural for us. We live in an announcement culture—where we tell people what we are doing. We rarely invite people into this process. This is both true when we change jobs and in our life with God. We

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 9.

would rather tell people when and how we are going to the shoreline than invite others into the vulnerability of discernment.

This, however, is often a result of misunderstanding communal discernment. We are afraid that people will tell us what we should do or judge us. But the community gathers together “not for discussion or dialogue, but for prayer.”<sup>84</sup> The process “is not through counseling techniques, advice, or commentary, but through prayerful” and “simple questions.”<sup>85</sup> Wise questions are “crucial” for discernment.<sup>86</sup> They “encourage growth.”<sup>87</sup> Likewise, “the purpose of discernment is not so much to get an answer as it is to walk with the Lord while living the question.”<sup>88</sup> The hope of communal discernment is not that we offer solid advice but that the Lord will “speak through us.”<sup>89</sup>

When Jeannie and I were trying to discern whether God was inviting us to plant Wellspring, we gathered close friends to discern with us. While we wanted to faithfully obey God’s call, we recognized that our life was super complex, and we could be easily swayed by various factors that might shift our “yes” in one direction or another. However, as we opened up our process to the wise questions of the community, God showed up. On multiple occasions, in prayer, God independently led people within our discerning community to Isa 43:19, “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 78.

forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Each time this verse was read the Spirit confirmed, in our community, that God was sending us to Pacific Grove. Our call was not based on a pro/con list but God’s presence in our community leading us into his future.

As people, seeking God’s heart, we often need others to help us hear God’s voice. Just as the God used the prophets to speak to the people of Israel, so he uses the church community to help us discern his voice. If you are needing to hear God’s invitation to you in this season, consider the practice below.

#### *Practice #1 Gather a Discernment Group*

To gather a discernment group, first identify a group of four to six people that you respect and trust. Second, send them a summary of your process and key questions that you are wrestling with. Remember, it is your discernment time. You get to shape the focus. Third, remind those attending that their role is not to tell the “discerner” what is best but to ask insightful, helpful questions to help them to hear God’s voice and see clearly. Fourth, let the group know that the meeting will be for 90-120 minutes.

Begin the meeting with introductions and reiterate expectations (that their role is to listen, ask questions, not offer advice, or share their experience.) It might be helpful to begin with silence and a reading of Ps 23. Having prayed, begin by sharing your process and current wonderings, and let the group ask clarifying questions. At this point, allow the group to ask their prayerfully considered questions and see what God does.

#### *Questions to Consider:*

- 1) Can you think of a time when you rushed a big decision (or simply did a pro/con list) without involving your community in the process? What happened as result?
- 2) What topic did you decide to discern? How did the experience go? Did you find the community discernment helpful in hearing God's invitation?

### **Reconciliation**

My children fight all the time. They fight over who gets which digging tools at the beach and who gets which towel after a swim in the bay. They fight over who gets to touch the star fish and who found the better skipping rock. And yet if you were to ask them, "Does your fighting have anything to do with God?" I am confident that they would say, "No." Most adults lounging at the beach (and likely in the church too) would agree.

But if we turn to the New Testament and its teaching, it is clear that Jesus would offer a different perspective. He consistently connects our experience of forgiveness with our willingness to forgive (Mt 6:12). He teaches that reconciliation is a key ingredient in the kingdom of God and therefore part of what it means to be in his presence.

Jesus once told a story about a master who forgave a servant a large sum of money, but the servant later refuses to forgive a debtor a small sum. Consequently, the master summons the servant and delivers him to the jailers, until he can pay off his massive debt. Applying this parable to everyday life, Jesus ends by saying, "so also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Mt 18:35). Simply, our connection to God is utterly dependent upon reconciliation and forgiveness.

Too often, though, even in churches, reconciliation is reduced to skills and handouts, a “conflict resolution” ministry but disconnected from the presence of God.<sup>90</sup> David Fitch, in *Faithful Presence*, explains that when this happens, “what is lost, in the process, is that the real presence of Christ comes in the midst of reconciliation.”<sup>91</sup> When two people reconcile “the presence of Christ” is “established.”<sup>92</sup>

It is God’s presence that transforms reconciliation from a secular skill set to a shoreline practice. To practice reconciliation is to be with God—because God is in the reconciliation business. It is what God does. In the biblical narrative, we learn that “God is working for the reconciliation of the whole world to himself in Christ” (2 Cor 5:18).<sup>93</sup> This is the center of the gospel. Jesus draws near to us, while we are still enemies, to reconcile us to the Father.

As a practice, reconciliation is fairly straightforward. Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone” (Mt 18:15). If you are hurt by something that someone says or does, go privately to that person. Do not text them or gossip behind their back. Share your perspective but also listen to theirs.

The “offense presented could be a sin or simply a conflict.”<sup>94</sup> It doesn’t need to be big—just big enough to get in the way of your relationship. In Matthew 18:18, just a few verses later, Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound

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<sup>90</sup> David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 90, Kindle.

<sup>91</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 90.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 72.

in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” This language, of binding and loosing, was a way that rabbis “used to describe discernment” in the midst of any “disagreement.”<sup>95</sup> It could be about who gets to play with a sand toy fight or something more serious. Either way, Jesus teaches us to reconcile with the person.

While this can be intimidating, Jesus promises in Mt 18:20 that he will be present in the process. He says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Mt 18:20). Where two people are gathered to reconcile, Jesus promises to be there too. This is pivotal. When we reconcile, we are “invited into the arena of the presence of Christ.”<sup>96</sup> This means that “both my presence to the other person and my tending to Jesus’ presence here among us, is central to this discipline.”<sup>97</sup>

And it is because of these promises in the Gospels that Paul reinforces this teaching among the churches. He writes to the church in Colossae “bear with one another” and “forgive each other,” “as the Lord has forgiven” us (col 3:13). Likewise, he instructs the Ephesians to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave” us (Eph 4:32). Reconciliation and the presence of God go hand in hand. But, as always, it requires practice.

### *Practice #1: Allowing God to Forgive Us*

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>96</sup> Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 76.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 74.

James Bryan Smith, in *The Good and Beautiful Community*, believes that “if we meditate for a long time on how much we have been forgiven, it will help us forgive others.”<sup>98</sup> Because of this, one of the best ways to lean into reconciliation is to consider how God has forgiven us and allow it to sink in. Accordingly, this week take time to both make a list of how God has forgiven you in your life as well as note the times this week that God forgives you when you do not love him with all of your heart or your neighbor as yourself. At the end of the week, take at least 30 minutes to marinate on the list you have written and allow the forgiveness of God to wash over you.

#### *Practice #2: Burden Bearing and Reconciliation*

Paul writes, “Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other” (Col 3:13). It is not coincidental that Paul mentions both “bearing with one another” and forgiveness in the same sentence. Sometimes we need a friend to help us bear the burden of reconciliation.<sup>99</sup> What might this look like? First, identify a person that you would like to reconcile with but maybe need some extra courage to approach. Next, choose a person you trust and ask if he/she could help you carry this burden by praying daily for you—that you would sense Jesus’ presence as you lean into reconciliation.

#### *Questions to Consider:*

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<sup>98</sup> James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community: Following the Spirit, Extending Grace, Demonstrating Love* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2010), 115.

<sup>99</sup> Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community*, 122-123.



- 1) If you were nail down your approach to conflict, what would it be? Are you a peace faker, peace breaker or peace maker?
- 2) After reflecting on God's forgiveness, what stood out? Were there any areas that God's forgiveness brought healing or went deeper?
- 3) Did you find it helpful to ask someone into your reconciliation process? What was that experience like for you?

## APPENDIX B

### Content Feedback

Please respond to the following questions. Both positive and critical feedback are encouraged.

What were your favorite parts of the content? Why?

What were your least favorite parts of the content? Why?

Was there a topic that seemed most relevant to you? Explain

Was there a topic that seemed least applicable to your life? Explain.

Which three experiments did you find most helpful?

Were there any experiments that you found either confusing or unhelpful?

Which questions did you find most helpful?

Which questions did you find least helpful?

Were there topics that could be expanded? How so?

Any other feedback or insights that you would like to share?

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